

# Performing the Feminisms of Euripides' *The Bacchae* in Britain

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## **Declaration of Authorship**

I , David George Gregory Bullen, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_



To Tom,

To my birth family,

And to my Bacchic family, By Jove.



*O dear women! My cadre, my sisterhood, my fellow travellers –  
you who left your distant lives  
to wander all the way from Lydia with me –  
lift up your tambourines!  
bang loud your drums!  
Surround Pentheus' house with noise and let the city see you!*  
- Anne Carson, *Bakkhai*

*Terrible rage terrible rage terrible rage terrible rage terrible rage  
terrible rage terrible rage terrible rage terrible rage terrible rage  
terrible rage terrible rage terrible rage terrible rage terrible rage  
terrible rage terrible rage terrible rage terrible rage terrible rage  
terrible rage terrible rage terrible rage terrible rage terrible rage.  
- Caryl Churchill, *Escaped Alone**

*There is volume in my silence  
If you stop to listen  
Look into my eyes and you will  
Hear quite clearly what I'm trying to say  
Be careful, I am saying  
Be careful  
What you have taken is not yours  
And one day, loudly, I shall take it back.*  
- Morgan Lloyd Malcolm, *Emilia*

## ABSTRACT

This thesis makes a vital intervention in current performance histories of Euripides' *The Bacchae*. By charting various twentieth and twenty-first century receptions of the play led by and centred on women, I account for underexplored parts of the play's journey through modern Britain. I document some performances for the first time and reappraise others that have received comparatively little attention in scholarship; as such, I make an original contribution to knowledge that enriches understanding of how theatre-makers have turned to Greek tragedy to speak to their lives and historical moments. I demonstrate that through their theatrical encounters with *The Bacchae*, successive generations of women theatre-makers have embodied, promoted, and critiqued the feminisms of their day. The thesis is therefore as much a history of women using theatre to negotiate the androcentric culture of the past and pro-women politics of the present as it is of Euripides' play.

I explore a range of case studies across four chapters. Chapter 1 returns to *The Bacchae* mounted in 1908 by Lillah McCarthy, making the case for her significance in this production. The next chapter explores two adaptations, *Rites* (1968) and *A Mouthful of Birds* (1986), drawing attention to how the theatre-makers used images and motifs from Euripides' play to respond to developments in second wave feminism. Chapter 3 explores various women-centric approaches in the context of twenty-first century 'postfeminism', examining productions by Kneehigh Theatre Company (2004-2005), Northampton Royal & Derngate (2012), and the Almeida Theatre (2015). The last chapter turns to my own recent encounters with *The Bacchae* as a theatre-maker: two adaptations from By Jove Theatre Company (2014-2015 and 2017), and a production by Lazarus Theatre Company (2016). Finally, I conclude by considering the potential of the maenad, a key figure across the case studies, for carrying forward my findings: an approach to the reception of Greek tragedy that coheres around the relationship between ancient representations of women and the modern women who have reclaimed them through performance.

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## NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION AND REFERENCING

For clarity and consistency, I have used the most familiar English transliterations of Greek names and words, i.e. *The Bacchae* not *Bakkhai*, except when referring to another author's transliteration (for example, Anne Carson uses *Bakkhai* and the Almeida production that staged her text followed suit).

I have utilised the MLA style guide to format my references and bibliography, in keeping with the Department of Drama, Theatre, and Dance's regulations. I have, however, organised my bibliography into lists of archival materials, interviews, reviews, and other works for ease of reference.



## INTRODUCTION

In March 2011, I directed a production of Euripides' *The Bacchae* that changed my life. The production was for Royal Holloway Classical Society, their annual performance of an ancient play in translation, and was the final show I directed prior to graduating and starting a career in theatre. In many ways the production set me on the path that my life has taken since, because my experience with Euripides' play lingered, and when I came back to Royal Holloway to do a Master's degree alongside theatre work, *The Bacchae* became the subject of my dissertation. The journey that started with a Student's Union production and carried on through further academic and theatrical encounters with the play now culminates in this study.

Directing a play requires you to get to know it very well – in order to realise the performance latent in the blueprint of the text, you have to understand how that text works. This does not, of course, give a director a monopoly on meaning – directing a play does not reveal the monolithic 'truth' of a text any more than seeing it in performance or reading it at home – and this is especially the case for a play of such intricate ambiguities as *The Bacchae*. But it does necessitate considering the practical dimensions of how a play functions as performance, thinking that might be called 'theatrical intelligence.'<sup>1</sup> This practical understanding of the play left me with two distinct impressions. The first revolves around the chorus: their continuous presence on stage from their entrance until the very end of the action as well as the dominance of their voice in the play – they have much more text than any of the named characters. The second is that the play's action seems to be geared towards its big and bizarre finale with Agave and the head of her son: this is its secret dramaturgical weapon, a final act gut punch that causes

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<sup>1</sup> My thanks to my supervisor, Liz Schafer, for introducing this highly instructive phrase to me.

the audience to rethink everything they have seen previously. Both aspects of the play feature women at the centre of what Euripides' text is doing.

Because of my initial women-centric impression of the play, I took for granted that *The Bacchae* was that rarest of dramas: a canonical text offering dynamic and exciting opportunities for a large number of female performers (this was actually part of the appeal at the time – Royal Holloway's student acting pool was mostly female). Yet, as I began to research the play's critical and theatrical reception history in greater depth during my Master's degree, I was struck by how previous scholars and theatre-makers barely seemed to acknowledge Agave and the chorus. That they are female characters, and that their relationship to Dionysus may be related in a significant way to their gender, did not seem to be of much interest at all. I found this astonishing – having staged the play, I was under the impression that the women and their womanness were of fundamental importance.

My research soon showed that other theatre-makers disagreed with me. I discovered that they shared the same fixation with Dionysus and Pentheus that seemed to occupy scholars. I also discovered that most of these theatre-makers were men: the lack of interest in women on stage is mirrored by the disproportionately small number of women in major roles on productions' creative teams. According to data from the Archive for Performances of Greek and Roman Drama (APGRD) and the V&A Theatre and Performance archive, since the play was first staged in English in 1908, only three women have directed it professionally, with only three more contributing in some way to their production's text.<sup>2</sup> This is not due to a lack of theatrical

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<sup>2</sup> The directors are Nancy Meckler (Shared Experience, 1988), Tamsin Shasha (Actors of Dionysus, 2000), and Emma Rice (Kneehigh Theatre Company, 2004). Anna Maria Murphy co-wrote the text for Rice's production, while Rosanna Lowe and Anne Carson remain the only women to have single authored an English language version of the play on the professional UK stage (for the Northampton Royal & Deragate in 2012 and the Almeida Theatre in 2015, respectively). I think it is highly likely that there are

interest more generally – in fact, the data shows that the play has been popular from the long 1970s onwards. There has been renewed interest in it in the twenty-first century. My MA dissertation, 'Missing Maenads and Queer Kings,' ultimately sought to address the question of why there had been such little engagement with *The Bacchae* by women theatre-makers and why the play's female characters have so rarely been the focus. I investigated three key twenty-first century productions, examining their interpretations of the play and how these were shaped in rehearsal. I concluded that choices made by male-led creative teams repeatedly subordinated the significance of Agave and the chorus by privileging focus on Dionysus and Pentheus in ways that layered onto, rather than emerged from, Euripides' text. Most often this involved imagining the Dionysiac as libidinous in nature, and Pentheus' arc in the play as turning on a crisis of sexuality. In other words, a gap had opened up in practice between *The Bacchae* itself and a set of common (mis)interpretive assumptions made about it.

This study continues my previous research but reconfigures my approach to it. Rather than ponder absences, my aim is now to fill them. By the end of my Master's, I had discovered that despite the impression left by scholarship and previous productions, women have engaged with *The Bacchae* – and, of course, women can be a central focus of interpretation. This study therefore sets out to recover these overlooked or undervalued contributions to the play's performance history. Given the paucity of current work on women-led and women-centric performance receptions of the play, the questions I ask here are the most pressing: how have women theatre-makers engaged with *The Bacchae*, and what does their work reveal about the play? How does their work enrich, re-frame, or challenge current performance histories of the

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women whose productions have not made it into the archives of the APGRD and V&A. Much of this work is no doubt from fringe, student, and community contexts – the most ephemeral forms of theatre. Nevertheless, the dominance of men in the archive is telling.

play as they stand? What is the relationship between women working on *The Bacchae*, the play itself, and the shifting socio-cultural conceptions of feminism from which productions have emerged? Does tracing the changing uses of *The Bacchae* by women theatre-makers chart developments in British (and increasingly global) feminisms? In answering these questions, my intentions are twofold: expand current understanding of how and why *The Bacchae* has been performed in the modern world, and assemble a history of women-led and women-centric theatre-making that is in dialogue with feminist ideology and activism, with *The Bacchae* – or, as I shall demonstrate, the maenad – as the connecting thread. Inevitably, this study cannot be exhaustive, but I hope it will lay the groundwork for future scholarship to continue telling the story of women and *The Bacchae* in the modern world.

### ***The Bacchae* as Culture-Text**

The recent critical afterlife of *The Bacchae* is enormous. Although the play itself was neglected from more or less the end of antiquity – perhaps on account of the extreme violence of Pentheus' death at the (literal) hands of the Theban women, perhaps because a pagan god instigates the violence – towards the end of the nineteenth century these same aspects were responsible for reviving critical interest.<sup>3</sup> It is telling that in Albert Henrichs' 1984 survey of the reception of Dionysus from Friedrich Nietzsche's 1872 *The Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music* onwards, it is increasingly difficult to separate critical attention paid towards the god from attention paid towards *The Bacchae* as the twentieth century progresses.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Simon Perris offers a helpful, succinct overview of the play's reception from 405 BCE to the twentieth century in the introduction to *The Gentle, Jealous God* (3-5).

<sup>4</sup> See Henrichs, 'Loss of Self, Suffering, Violence: The Modern View of Dionysus from Nietzsche to Girard.'

Henrichs points to significant works by Gilbert Murray, Erwin Rohde, E. R. Dodds, and René Girard that all approach *The Bacchae* via Dionysus or vice versa or both. Two further major studies of the play – R. P. Winnington-Ingram's *Dionysus and Euripides* and Charles Segal's *Dionysiac Poetics* – demonstrate their preoccupations with the god in their titles. Although there are trends in this vast array of material – Henrichs points to the themes of loss of self, suffering, and violence – very few works focus on the women of *The Bacchae*. Richard Seaford makes a telling remark in the introduction to his 1996 translation of the play when he says that 'the play's poetry, emotional power, and dramatic form cannot be fully appreciated' without exploring 'the significance of the power of Dionysus both in the play and in what we know of his cult' (30). Although Seaford disputes the post-Nietzschean readings of Segal, Dodds, and others, he has in common with them an assumption that Dionysus and the Dionysiac are primary meaning makers when it comes to interpreting the play.

Where this tradition crosses over into scholarship on the performance history of *The Bacchae*, Dionysus' influence begins to have a myopic effect. Classical reception is a relatively new field, emerging only at the end of the twentieth century. Attempts to document the modern afterlife of a single Greek drama are also all fairly recent.<sup>5</sup> As a result, the literature on the performance history of *The Bacchae* specifically is limited. The earliest is George Sampatakakis' 2004 doctoral thesis, although none of the material from this study was published in English until 2017, when a summary of Sampatakakis' findings appeared as a chapter in George Rodosthenous' edited volume *Contemporary Adaptations of Greek Tragedy*. Sophie Mills

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<sup>5</sup> Pioneering examples include *Medea in Performance 1500-2000*, edited by Edith Hall, Fiona Macintosh, and Oliver Taplin (2000) and *Agamemnon in Performance 458 BC to AD 2004*, edited by Fiona Macintosh, Pantelis Michelakis, Edith Hall, and Oliver Taplin (2005). Early performance histories of *The Bacchae* by George Sampatakakis and Simon Perris emerge from, and are situated in, this same scholarly community.

includes a chapter on the reception of the play in her 2006 Duckworth Companion, and another chapter with a similar focus by Betine van Zyl Smit appeared in David Stuttard's 2016 edited volume *Looking at Bacchae*. These are gestures rather than in-depth studies, however: both Mills' and Stuttard's volumes are predominantly concerned with Euripides' play itself rather than its reception. It was therefore not until 2014 that the first monograph exclusively focused on the performance history of *The Bacchae* was published. This was Erika Fischer-Lichte's *Dionysus Resurrected* – and the book's title demonstrates her priorities just as clearly as Winnington-Ingram's and Segal's do. In addition, Simon Perris has produced a related series of works on the literary reception of *The Bacchae*, beginning in 2008 with his doctoral thesis. He published material from this as various chapters in edited volumes and journal articles prior to his thesis-based monograph *The Gentle, Jealous God*, which appeared in 2017 (again, a Dionysus-focused title indicating a Dionysus-focused overarching interest). These texts constitute the main body of literature on the global performance history of *The Bacchae* in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Yet, as I explore below, they return again and again to the same performances, establishing a canon of productions that have little interest in women.

Of the twenty plus performance receptions of *The Bacchae* collectively discussed by Fischer-Lichte, Sampatakakis, Perris, Mills, and van Zyl Smit, a handful appear across multiple works. Richard Schechner and the Performance Group's *Dionysus in 69* (1968-1969) is the most discussed: Fischer-Lichte devotes a full chapter to it, while all the other six texts either give it significant attention in terms of its own section or at least mention it. Wole Soyinka's syncretic interpretation, staged by the National Theatre of Great Britain in London in 1973, receives a similar amount of attention, appearing prominently in four of the texts – again, a whole chapter in *Dionysus Resurrected* – and gets a mention in two more. These are closely followed by Klaus

Michael Grüber's 1974 production at the Berlin Schaubühner (four appearances including two full chapters), Suzuki Tadashi's various performance receptions of the play across the world from 1978 to 2008 (four appearances including two full chapters), and Theodoros Terzopoulos' production at Delphi in 1986 (three appearances, two of which are full chapters).

I am not suggesting that these productions have become canonical exclusively because of their repeated appearances in the seven texts I have identified. Rather, it is the effect of scholarship repeatedly positioning the same receptions in the overall narrative of the performance history of *The Bacchae* that makes them part of the canon. This is supported by a web of further publications that discuss, to greater and lesser extents, these receptions in different contexts.<sup>6</sup> The effect is most apparent in Mills' and van Zyl Smit's chapters. Both provide potted reception histories in the context of publications focused on the play itself, and so they have the space to discuss only a few productions in detail: both choose *Dionysus in 69*, while Mills also chooses Soyinka's version and van Zyl Smit chooses Grüber's. The risk here is that these few receptions come to represent, in microcosm, the journey of *The Bacchae* on the modern stage. What makes this problematic is that while the canon represents a variety of interpretations – Soyinka's is very different to Schechner's, for example, and very different again to Grüber's or Suzuki's – there is a dearth of interest in women.

This repeated narrative of how the play has been engaged with in the modern world suggests what Paul Davis might term a 'culture-text' that takes the bacchae out of *The Bacchae*.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> When Sampatakakis was writing his thesis in the early twenty-first century, the already prominent place of *Dionysus in 69* in scholarship, both theatre studies and classics, in fact led to him *not* writing about the production as one of his case studies (156).

<sup>7</sup> Davis discusses this term in connection to Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, observing the distinction between Dickens' fixed text and the culture-text of 'the Carol' that is composed of the myriad other texts, images, ideas, and motifs that have been inspired by the original, a body of material that is always in the process of being added to and rewritten. The culture-text may contain material not found in the text but

This repeated set of images, ideas, and theatrical motifs has two main threads. The first minimises the significance of women in the original text in favour of contemporary interests that emerge from re-reading Dionysus and Pentheus through modern cultural concepts, most prominently male (homo)sexuality. This makes Dionysus and Pentheus the dominant objects of interest on stage, with the chorus as secondary. The second thread generalises the nature of the Dionysiac subversion that initiates the action of the play, either re-imagining the 'maenads' as united not by gender but by class or race or nothing in particular, or else contextualising it in terms of ritual (sometimes of Dionysus, sometimes of deities from non-Greek cultures) rather than, or as well as, revolution. Both aspects of this culture-text are couched in terms of the milieu of the long 1970s, an assumption that the play provides an analogy for 'drug culture, rock music, sex and violence' (Easterling 36). In and of itself, the creation of a culture-text is fairly innocuous and, as Davis makes clear in his article's discussion of *A Christmas Carol*, somewhat inevitable. But with *The Bacchae*, there may have been damaging consequences: in my interview with director and classicist Helen Eastman in 2012, Eastman suggested that if there are fewer women in theatre willing to engage with *The Bacchae* as directors or writers, it may partly be a result of what I have described here as the play's culture-text, which has rendered it a text concerned primarily with male libido and sexuality.

*Dionysus in 69* is emblematic in terms of my concerns here. As an interpretation of *The Bacchae*, it epitomises the culture-text. Dionysus and Pentheus were the undisputed focus, and Schechner insisted that liberation of erotic desire is essential to the Dionysiac experience (Zeitlin, *Dionysus in 69* 72). This was conceived in performance in several ritualised sequences,

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that nevertheless has, through repetition, become part of that text's wide cultural legacy, assuming a kind of authenticity. See Davis, 'Literary History: Re-telling a Christmas Carol.'



some amongst the cast and others between performers and audience members. Despite its liberatory aspirations, in practice this was starkly anti-women, both in the invitation for audience members to objectify and grope the naked or semi-naked female performers during the 'rituals', and in the treatment of women in the audience. Brian de Palma's filmed version of the production emphasises both of these things (whilst not acknowledging them). In fact, the film records an instance of sexual assault between the man playing Pentheus and a woman in the audience.<sup>8</sup> While this is an extreme example, and certainly not all productions are as hostile to women, *Dionysus in 69* demonstrates that amongst the performance consequences of the culture-text that has emerged around *The Bacchae* there is not only a tendency to marginalise women in the play's meanings but a repeated impulse to reduce maenads (and the women playing them) to sexual objects.

The reception of *Dionysus in 69* – with its crowning place in the performance canon of *The Bacchae* – has also led to historiography that eclipses the contributions of women. Fischer-Lichte does this most blatantly by misleadingly suggesting that Dionysus' 'resurrection' in the modern world was on June 7, 1968 in the body of William Finley, who played the god in the first performance of *Dionysus in 69* (*Dionysus Resurrected 2*). This is despite the fact that sixty years prior, Dionysus had already returned in the form of actress and suffragist Lillah McCarthy, who in 1908 played the role in what is likely the first modern production in history. Mills also ignores McCarthy's production – her account jumps from unperformed translations of the sixteenth century to the 1960s, with *Dionysus in 69* the first production she names (105-106). Van Zyl

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<sup>8</sup> This point was made to me by my theatre-making colleague Marcus Bell, whose excellent MA thesis takes *Dionysus in 69* to task ('On Misreading the Bakkhai'). As Bell points out, scholarship on the production has been complicit in framing Schechner's work as mischievous or as a consequence of experimental art – or in overlooking the problems altogether.

Smit follows Mills, citing the latter's suggestion that '*Bacchae* was considered so violent that it was seldom performed before the 1960s' and again chooses *Dionysus in 69* as one of five productions she discusses (147, 148). While Sampatakakis and Perris do acknowledge the earlier production – in the conclusion to his thesis, Sampatakakis refutes the idea that *Dionysus in 69* represents the modern rebirth of *The Bacchae* (259) – their discussion minimises McCarthy's vital role in bringing Euripides' play to the stage for the first time in modern history.<sup>9</sup> Beyond *Dionysus in 69*, the rest of the canon is dominated by the creative work of men on stage and off, occluding the contributions of women theatre-makers whose performance receptions of *The Bacchae* are just as significant.

### **Women and *The Bacchae***

Between the culture-text and performance canon of *The Bacchae*, Eastman's suggestion that the play is perceived as androcentric is certainly feasible. To what extent does such a perception reflect the text of the play? Dionysus and Pentheus certainly do feature prominently; I am not suggesting anything to the contrary. I am also not suggesting that interpretations that foreground the male characters, or sex and sexuality, are invalid. From the perspectives of both academic and theatre-maker, I maintain that dramatic texts are made intelligible through interpretation, and as Charles Segal observes, 'any interpretation is an intervention in the text and a re-creation of the text ... there is no escaping the rearrangement of relations or the shifting of emphases among details' (5). What I wish to point out is the dominance of a single set of interpretative choices – what I have described as the culture-text – coming to appear fixed, as if interpretations that are the product of particular ideologies and socio-cultural moments are

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<sup>9</sup> I discuss this in more detail in Chapter 1.

actually a definitive answer to the question, 'what is *The Bacchae* about?' Here, therefore, I want to ask this question again, outlining another way to make sense of the drama.

So, what is *The Bacchae* about? The plot concerns the return of the god Dionysus to his home city of Thebes and the violent reassertion of his divinity in the face of his disbelieving mortal cousin Pentheus, Thebes' current king, and his aunt, Agave. But this could also describe the mythic narrative Euripides was adapting as much as the play itself. Thematically *The Bacchae* has a lot more to say, and against the backdrop of overwhelming critical attention on Dionysus and Pentheus, Allison Hersh's reading stands out:

... *The Bacchae* thematizes the struggle to preserve the Athenian patriarchal value system. Indeed, the maintenance of gender difference and the preservation of patriarchal rule is the dramatic text; thus a patriarchal agenda is not only embedded within *The Bacchae* but ultimately comprises the text itself. *The Bacchae* essentially explores the repercussions of women rejecting their conventional gender-determined roles within a patriarchal society, instead embracing a lifestyle which they find empowering and meaningful. (411)

Published in 1992, Hersh's reading follows in the vein of Sue-Ellen Case's famous 1985 essay 'Classic Drag,' which persuasively argues that Greek drama traffics in patriarchally-produced images of women – drag roles powered by male fantasies.<sup>10</sup> In this view, the 'remarkably contemporary' gender politics of *The Bacchae* (Mills 8) may inform the play's engagement with

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<sup>10</sup> The essay was originally published in *Theatre Journal* and was later included, in revised form, in Case's landmark *Feminism and Theatre* (1988). There is a deliberate provocativeness to Case's rhetoric, and of course there remains a distinction between the kind of practice she describes as 'drag' and the modern queer artform that retains subversive potential. Nevertheless, some modern performances of Greek tragedy blur these normative and subversive definitions of drag – I discuss one (unintentional) instance of this in Chapter 3.

ritual, metatheatre, or whatever else a critic is focused on, but they also implicate it in the ultimately misogynist social and cultural order of fifth century BCE Athens.

Hersh understands the actions of the Theban women, who leave the city *en masse* to worship Dionysus on wild Mount Cithaeron and in the process exhibit behaviour determined by Athenian society as typically masculine (hunting, fighting, killing with both weapons and bare hands), as a rebellion against a strict, gender-based social order adhered to by the Athenians who first watched *The Bacchae*. She argues that the play masks this by suggesting that the Theban women are possessed by Dionysus 'in his vengeful scheme to vindicate his mother's honour' (411). Thus 'any act of revolt or resistance undertaken by the Bacchae is automatically qualified and dismissible, since madness mediates the impulse to break away from patriarchal roles' (411-412). Hersh's suggestion is a radical refusal to accept the premise of either the play or the preceding myth, both of which frame the Theban women's actions as derived from Dionysiac madness (and perhaps wine), while acknowledging the potential to view these actions as revolutionary on account of oppressive social conditions to which the play itself attests; Hersh points to Euripides' multiple mentions of the loom as 'a persuasive metaphor for female enslavement' (411). '*The Bacchae* ultimately stacks the proverbial deck against the bacchantes,' Hersh writes, 'suggesting that their transgressive triumph [in revolting against Theban society] is fated to be not only unsuccessful and unsustainable but grounded in fantasy, delusion and madness' (412). This reading is especially radical precisely because it proceeds from the perspective of the Theban women rather than either of the male characters who 'control' them, Dionysus and Pentheus.

Hersh's women-centric reading is instructive for re-thinking assumptions about the play. This is overdue in scholarship that focuses on Dionysus (and, to a slightly lesser extent,

Pentheus), where the bacchae themselves are pushed to the margins. There is some evidence to suggest that Euripides' own focus was on the chorus. He was adapting a popular mythic episode – Aeschylus produced a trilogy of plays dealing with the Theban royal family that may well have culminated in an episode in which Pentheus is killed by maenads; titles of tragedies by other writers also survive that suggest frequent engagement with the Dionysus-Pentheus conflict. The evidence suggests Euripides is pointedly departing from the Aeschylean version of the story.<sup>11</sup>

Chris Carey has observed that, given the fact that a tragedian's choice of chorus was a key part of their framing of a mythic episode, Euripides' choice when it comes to *The Bacchae* – a group of maenads alien to Thebes – was 'not inevitable' (71). Their femaleness and foreignness, and their invocation in the play's title (which reaffirms their femaleness), should therefore not be taken for granted. Furthermore, Jennifer March has argued that Euripides makes two narrative interventions: Pentheus' disguise as a maenad, and his mother Agave's role as his chief murderer.<sup>12</sup> Both Carey and March's observations help recall the way in which the story dramatized in *The Bacchae* reflects a series of artistic choices made by Euripides rather than a fixed tradition.

As March suggests, paying attention to these choices indicates a focus on women and gender ('Euripides the Misogynist?' 56). Certainly Agave's role in the conclusion to *The Bacchae* gives a female character a highly charged scene of pathos. In Aristotelian terms, Agave

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<sup>11</sup> Alan Sommerstein discusses Aeschylus' trilogy, offering a putative reconstruction of their structure and thematic focus, in 'Bacchae and Earlier Tragedy.' He also discusses a second Dionysus trilogy by Aeschylus, called the *Lykourgeia* by Aristophanes (*Women at the Thesmophoria* l. 135). Dodds discusses Aeschylus' Dionysus plays, as well as other titles of plays dealing with the Dionysus-Pentheus episode (xxviii-xxix). The ending of Aeschylus' *Pentheus* seems to be alluded to by Euripides' Dionysus in the prologue (ll. 50-52) as well as the direction Pentheus seems to be headed prior to the disguised spying idea (ll. 780-786, 796-799, 809).

<sup>12</sup> For Carey's discussion, see 'Looking at the Bacchae in *Bacchae*'. March presents the evidence for Euripides' inventions in 'Euripides' *Bakchai*: A Reconsideration in the Light of Vase-Paintings.' An abbreviated version of the same argument appears in 'Euripides the Misogynist?'

experiences both *peripeteia* (surprising reversal) and *anagnorisis* (realisation) when she comes to understand that rather than triumphantly hunting down a wild lion, she has participated in her own son's death. This positions Agave – not Pentheus or Dionysus – as the ultimate tragic focus of the play. This aligns *The Bacchae* with other Euripidean dramaturgical interventions that express his understanding of the human condition through the suffering of the female tragic protagonist (63).<sup>13</sup>

In the context of the other changes made by Euripides, it is clear that although Dionysus and Pentheus have an undeniably important role in the play, their conflict is centred on women. Dionysus' driving of the Theban women up to Cithaeron is the trigger for Pentheus to return to Thebes from a foreign mission (ll. 215-220); Pentheus' anxieties about the Theban women underpins his distrust of the Dionysiac cult and in particular the foreign priest Dionysus impersonates (ll. 220-225, 233-238, 487); the first messenger's report on the Theban maenads incites Pentheus to further action (ll. 778-779); Pentheus' desire to spy on the women allows Dionysus to lay his trap (l. 812); and the women Pentheus was so concerned about come to be his killers. The play concludes with a scene centred on one of those killers, a woman. All of this action is punctuated by, commented upon, and – to some extent – seen through the eyes of the female characters who have by far the most stage time and the most text, the maenad chorus. Moreover, the multi-roling, three-actor conventions of the Athenian stage mean that it is likely

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<sup>13</sup> March mentions Medea and Phaedra ('Euripides the Misogynist?' 48). I would add to this list Alcestis, Hecuba (in both her eponymous play and *Trojan Women*), Andromache, all the enslaved women of *Trojan Women*, and Clytemnestra in *Iphigenia in Aulis*. This latter play was performed in the same trilogy as *The Bacchae* at the City Dionysia, which suggests a thematic focus on parents and their differing relationships to their murdered children (see Hall, 'Perspectives' on the potential resonances of the trilogy; cf. March, 'Euripides the Misogynist?' 36).

the same virtuoso actor played both Pentheus and Agave, making the cross-dressing episode even more pointedly about the performance of femininity.<sup>14</sup>

So while the play is certainly rich in intertextual, intercultural, and metatheatrical resonances – not least in the uniqueness of Dionysus as protagonist in his own drama<sup>15</sup> – and the numerous, diverse readings pursued by scholars are certainly legitimate, it is crucial to remember that representation and discussion of women and femininity are fundamental features of *The Bacchae*. This is certainly the case for the extant Euripidean text and even more so when it comes to the play's original performance. I raise this here to serve as a reminder that far from being idiosyncratic products of modern views skewing ancient ideas, women-centric interpretations of the play have legitimate grounding in Euripides – even if the women and men creating those interpretations reject some or all of Euripides' framework. That these women-centric readings might seem 'incongruous' (to borrow Hersh's term, 410) underscores the need to recuperate them for the wider understanding of the journey the play has taken in the modern world.

In fact, acknowledging women-centric readings, and thus recognising that women are a key part of what *The Bacchae* is about, can help open up new ways of approaching the related question of why the play began to be performed again in the twentieth century after such a long absence from the stage. Scholars writing on the play's performance history have spent a considerable amount of time dwelling on this. In *Dionysus Resurrected*, Fischer-Lichte notes the parallel interests in ritual amongst scholars and theatre-makers in the 1960s and 1970s, with *The*

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<sup>14</sup> On this, see Hall, 'Perspectives' 20-21.

<sup>15</sup> The only other surviving fifth century Athenian play in which Dionysus plays such a major role is Aristophanes' comedy *Frogs*, also performed in 405 BC. *The Bacchae* is the only extant tragedy in which he is the protagonist. For a recent discussion of the theatrical connections between *Frogs* and *The Bacchae*, see Wyles 69-70.

*Bacchae* utilised as a key text for both groups. This monograph is not the first time Fischer-Lichte has made the case for the similarities between the conditions of the long 1970s and *The Bacchae*: she discusses the parallels at length in *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual* (2005). In particular, she finds a prevalence of 'libidinous energy' in both in the socio-cultural upheaval of the period and performance receptions of Euripides' play (224). Fischer-Lichte goes further in *Dionysus Resurrected*, however, suggesting that the play's popularity is rooted in the impact of globalisation on cultures across the world, claiming Dionysus as the 'god of globalization' (*Dionysus Resurrected* 225).

Sampatakakis argues against Fischer-Lichte, proposing instead that 'the *Bacchae* is a play for the theatre of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, that is to say for the theatre of the mise-en-scène beyond psychological characterization and closer to the modern ritualization of theatre' ('Dionysus the Destroyer of Traditions' 190). As in his earlier thesis, Sampatakakis indicates that rather than being a result of a change in the way *The Bacchae* was discussed, the return of the play to the stage was due to developments in theatre-making methodologies that happened to find the text amenable raw material. He rejects, for example, the idea that Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* was responsible for reviving sufficient interest in the play for it to be staged ('Bakkhai-model' 259).

In his thesis, Perris provides something of a counterpoint to Mills' theory that *The Bacchae* was considered too violent to be performed, suggesting that the immense potential for violence in Euripides' play is one of the things that has drawn twentieth and twenty-first century writers to it ('Literary Translation...' 2). In *The Gentle, Jealous God* this emphasis on violence is downplayed and while here Perris does not attempt to answer the 'why' question explicitly, he implies that *The Bacchae* needed accessible translations in order to become popular enough to



be staged (6), and that the text has 'proven itself predisposed to creative translation' (170). Like Fischer-Lichte, he structures his theorisations about the play around Dionysus, suggesting that he might be considered a 'god of translation, adaptation and other modes of textual transformation' (167).

These scholars are all correct in their own ways: ritual, globalisation, theatre-making methodologies, violence, and translatability have all played a role in generating and perpetuating performances of *The Bacchae* on the modern stage. Lillah McCarthy's Dionysus from 1908, however, points to an otherwise overlooked fact: in Britain, at least, *The Bacchae* only made its return to the stage after the advent of first wave feminism. This play that turns on women violently rebelling against male patriarchal authority was only 're-discovered' on stage when patriarchal Western culture's relationship to women began to change, partly as a result of the occasionally violent rebellion of many involved in the women's suffrage movement. This is the moment that Dionysus returned to the modern world. Rather than 'libidinous energy,' the most striking parallels between what happened on stage in 1908 and what was happening in society at the same time foreground the changing status of women. Moreover, in later periods when *The Bacchae* has been especially popular – namely the long 1970s and the twenty-first century – second, third, and fourth waves of feminism have been factors at work in the socio-cultural environment out of which many performance receptions have emerged.

I do not mean to imply any simplistic equation between feminism and the actions of the maenads in *The Bacchae*, or with maenadism more generally. As Hersh argues, it is possible to read the maenads in Euripides' play as taking collective action in response to gender-based oppression, but the text is clear that they are 'possessed' by Dionysus. Indeed, Judith Butler stressed in a recent public lecture on *The Bacchae* her view that the Theban maenads are not

'liberated' in any recognisably modern way – they may have been freed from the control of Pentheus' Thebes, but they are still subject to a figurehead of the divine patriarchy.<sup>16</sup> While I do not wish to suggest that a correlation between feminism and maenadism is inevitable – not least because feminism is far from monolithic, transforming in response to particular historical moments and socio-cultural demands – nor that such an equation is automatically pro-feminist, the fact is that the first modern production of the play was coincident with an intensification of first wave feminist activism in many parts of the society where that production took place. Furthermore, there was significant overlap between those participating in this first wave activism and those creating and watching the production. As such the situation warrants further investigation.

Re-evaluating the 1908 production opens up the possibility of exploring in more detail the relationship between feminism, women theatre-makers, and the representation of women and maenadism in *The Bacchae*. As Hersh's discussion of two adaptations from the period of second wave feminism indicates, there have been women theatre-makers who have imagined the possibilities of the play's narrative beyond its Euripidean frame, reconceiving Dionysus and the maenads' relationship to him. Seeking out these kinds of receptions of *The Bacchae* and bringing them into the context of the play's wider performance history would therefore stand to greatly enrich that history, complementing existing work, and contesting the dominant narratives that have come to redefine the play in narrow terms, at least as far as the representation of women is concerned. As such this thesis, which like Hersh takes the Theban maenads' perspective on *The*

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<sup>16</sup> Any doubt as to Dionysus' allegiance to the Olympian order is cleared up in his appearance *ex machina*, when he defers to his father Zeus' authority in allowing such brutal vengeance against the Thebans to take place (l. 1349, 'long ago Zeus my father ordained this'). Butler's talk, 'Kinship Trouble in *The Bacchae*' is available in full on YouTube (<https://youtu.be/ixwrw0PMC8I>). I discuss her views in more detail in Chapter 2.

*Bacchae* as axiomatic, sets about restoring visibility to the maenadic dimension of the play's modern afterlife.

### **Defining Terms: Women and Feminism**

Underpinning my research questions is a firm avowal that women matter. This is relevant both in terms of approaching the characters in the play and when considering the play's performance history. As I have begun to show, they are part of the narrative – the play's and the performance history's – and deserve to be articulated as such. But if this still seems too obvious an assertion to make, it is one that is sadly necessary in the context of scholarship on not only *The Bacchae* but maenadism more generally, going back over a century: in 1903, Jane Harrison had to observe that 'so persistent is the dislike to commonplace fact, that we are repeatedly told that the maenads are purely mythological creations and the maenad orgies never appear historically in Greece' (388). Harrison was reacting to the prevailing view among her male colleagues that maenads were as fantastical as part-animal satyrs. The maenad as fantasy – and therefore as insubstantial and easily set aside – is a notion this study seeks to counter when it comes to *The Bacchae* and its performance history.

When I use the term 'woman' in this study, I understand it to mean all who identify as such. Even so, using the term in a universalising way is problematic, compressing a huge diversity of experience inflected by such factors as race, sexuality, and class into a single, homogenous identity marker. In the context of a study such as this, there is the risk of suggesting that the universal 'woman' will inevitably engage with a play differently from 'man' for purely essentialist reasons. There is also the risk of asserting the significance of such engagement solely because they have been produced by women. Seeking out women-led and

women-centric performance receptions of *The Bacchae* is therefore a deliberate application of strategic essentialism, helping to make visible material that has previously been overlooked.<sup>17</sup>

In my discussion of these performance receptions, I make no assumptions that the women working on them speak for all women, nor that the work produced is the result of an essentialised 'womanness.' I have found that the receptions I discuss often have different things to say about *The Bacchae* in comparison to much of the male-created and male-centred work privileged by existing scholarship. Rather than attributing this to 'womanness,' I have sought to demonstrate that the differences may be accounted for by paying attention to factors such as the creators' lived experience of being a woman in a particular historical moment. As my references to Hersh's work above indicated, these differences form part of the reason why women-led and women-centric receptions are important to include in the performance history of *The Bacchae*. Nevertheless, in the process of attempting to fill in gaps in this history, I have discovered more: older women, women of colour, and trans women, for example, are rarely represented, on stage or off, in the productions I discuss. These absences are considered in the conclusion to the study.

A further factor informing the receptions of *The Bacchae* that I discuss is feminism. This risks being as troublingly simplistic a term as 'woman.' The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines feminism as '[a]dvocacy of equality of the sexes and the establishment of the political, social, and economic rights of the female sex; the movement associated with this' (def. 3). This does not account for the ideological variance on what 'equality of the sexes' constitutes and what the

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<sup>17</sup> Strategic essentialism is a concept, first used by Gayle Chakravorty Spivak in 1988, that aims to overcome the potential problems posed to feminism by disavowing the possibility of women as a coherent group. It is problematic, of course, and risks reinstating essentialism in all but name; see Stone, 'On the Genealogy of Women' (20-22). I use it here with caution as a means of redressing the balance of current, androcentric performance histories.

specific rights of the 'female sex' are amongst those identifying as feminist – nor, indeed, does it acknowledge the debates over sex and gender within feminist discourse that might establish who is included (and excluded) by the 'female sex.' Although first, second, third, and fourth wave feminism are frequently acknowledged as sufficiently distinct iterations of the feminist 'movement,' what distinguishes the waves – and what the points of overlap are – is a matter of ongoing debate. In some cases the wave model is rejected entirely. Within and beyond the 'waves,' many denominations of feminism exist: Nancy McHugh's 2007 *Feminist Philosophies A-Z* has entries for third world feminism, postmodern feminism, ecofeminism, liberal feminism, radical feminism, socialist feminism, and pragmatist feminism, among others. Feminism is as diverse as the women, men, and nonbinary individuals who engage with it, across the globe and through time, and so acknowledging that each practitioner of feminism employs and responds to it in their own way is crucial.

In attempting to trace the relationship between different women, different feminisms, and different receptions of *The Bacchae*, I certainly do not wish to suggest that this is a history of 'feminist productions,' or else a search for a 'feminist production' in contrast to those that are 'non-feminist'. Even those productions described by their creators as feminist express only the feminism of those naming their work as such; others may disagree with their specific politics. I wish to explore a history of women whose performance receptions of *The Bacchae* are inflected by, or reflective of, their personal feminisms, or else the feminist contexts of their historical moment. I have used the model of feminist waves – first to fourth – for ease of reference, but I acknowledge the debate surrounding these classifications and therefore attempt, at the start of each chapter, to account for some of the issues in each wave.

### ***The Bacchae* as Live-Text**

I began this introduction by highlighting my original relationship to *The Bacchae* as a theatre-maker. There is, as I have shown, a gap between my practical understanding of the play as a performance text and the play's scholarly reception. Nevertheless, I continue in this study with the understanding that a play on paper or as a production must be approached in the context of performance. There are two key reasons for this. Firstly, on the stage text is mediated through the live moment of performance – it is in this way that it is made intelligible. The written – or, rather, spoken – word is one factor in determining this intelligibility. Other factors include visual scenographic signifiers (set, costume, props, lighting, effects, and so on), other non-verbal signifiers (music, sound effects, audience chatter), the arrangement of the performance space (including the relationship between the audience and performers), the expressiveness of the performer (movement, gesture, use of voice, their extratheatrical profile), and the socio-cultural moment in which the performance takes place. It is because of this that texts can continue to be understood in different ways, despite the relative fixity of meaning at the level of verbal signification. Secondly, approaching a play or production as performance places emphasis on the creation of meaning as an active process, on the labour of performers, directors, writers (including translators) as shapers of meaning, and on audiences as interpreters. I call this concept – text in a performative dimension, with all the implications I have outlined above – live-text.

The notion of live-text helps, in this study, to develop a consistent methodological approach to performance. Consistency is needed here because of my differing relationship to the material. For recent productions that I have seen in person, I am able to draw on conventional performance analysis. For others, I have only been able to access a video recording, which, aside

from issues of quality, alienates a performance from the socio-cultural context in which it was originally received. For others still there is no way of seeing the performance whatsoever, which means relying more heavily on archival traces such as prompt copies, published texts, photographs, design plans, and so on. By utilising the notion of live-text as a means of approaching each case study, no matter its archival accessibility, I aim to be able to develop an understanding of the changing nuances of case studies that cover a period of almost a hundred years.

Live-text emphasises meaning as entirely contingent on the moment in which it is produced by an amalgamation of signifiers that are then interpreted by an audience. Because each audience member may interpret performance differently, the concept of live-text acknowledges the fallibility of any one individual's critique (including my own for those performances I have seen). At the same time it maintains that there was, in the moment of performance, a collocation of signifiers able to be 'read' and that a number of theatre-makers collaborated in order to arrange these signifiers in a way that was identifiably a whole, evidenced most obviously in the not-quite-exact repeatability of the whole across a number of performance instances. As well as highlighting the mediation of written text through performative factors, thus foregrounding the work of a range of theatre-makers besides the author, the meanings produced are acknowledged as, inevitably, polyvalent. It is of course as impossible to completely reconstruct live-text for the purposes of analysis as it is to suggest that any particular recollection of the live-text by an audience member (in, e.g., a review) is more or less authoritative than another. As such the concept of live-text is knowingly an analytical conceit, underpinned by the interpretation of evidence. Rather than offering unitary certainties, it

highlights the possibilities of performance, thus rendering it consistent with the provisionality of meaning experienced by theatre-makers in preparing performance.

My focus in this study is on the work of women in theatre. Implied in this is an epistemology that takes the people making theatre as the subject of interest as much as, if not over and above, the aesthetic works (plays, productions, performances) they generate. Live-text is also a helpful lens in this regard. In discussing my case studies via the concept of live-text, I have sought to synthesise a range of primary and secondary materials, which vary in their availability and reliability from production to production. While I have approached all my case study productions via the archive, uncovering the material indices of both performances and the processes that led to them, I have also endeavoured to take an oral history approach by interviewing the individuals involved in the productions. This has not always been possible, of course – most obviously in the case of the 1908 production, but also because some individuals are difficult to interview for a range of reasons. Throughout I aim to facilitate my interpretation of sources with the ‘theatrical intelligence’ of a theatre-maker, and this is most pronounced when I turn to my own theatre practice towards the end of this study. When approaching my own work, I have also consulted with archival material and conducted interviews, but I have supplemented these with my own primary material as witness to processes and performances, drawing on Gay McAuley’s approach to studying rehearsals in *Not Magic But Work* (2012) to account for this difficult methodological terrain.

In selecting which productions to focus on in this study, I initially sought to establish a wide picture of the play’s overall performance history. To do this, I made two key decisions in terms of limiting my scope. I firstly decided to focus exclusively on productions led by or centred on women in some way; this emerges from my broader epistemological motivations for



conducting the study. I then decided to limit my geographical scope; working at the global level would have been unwieldy task. One of the reasons women-centric and women-led productions have been excluded by existing performance histories is because of a scope this wide: in trying to account for productions all over the world, Fischer-Lichte, Sampatakakis, and others have tried to include the most significant. This is a slippery metric to use and has cut women almost entirely out of the picture. I have therefore focused exclusively on the UK. This is not to say there has been a lack of fascinating and pertinent receptions of *The Bacchae* by women elsewhere – there have been plenty.<sup>18</sup>

My focus on the UK emerges not only from my previous research into the subject and the pragmatic limitations of studying here but from my experience of working as a theatre-maker in this country. My familiarity with working in the UK theatre industry enables me to nuance my interpretation of the archival information I have been able to locate and, in my final chapter, act as a witness to the process of crafting receptions of the play. As it will become clear, this is particularly valuable in recuperating fringe theatre receptions of *The Bacchae* for the play's performance history. Given that the UK fringe scene is a site where women have historically had more opportunity to flourish than in mainstream institutions, it is especially important to consider fringe productions here.<sup>19</sup> A focus on the UK thus enables me to investigate my case studies in greater depth while including often overlooked parts of the theatre industry. As with the predominant absence of women of colour and trans women in these

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<sup>18</sup> In 2017, for example, a Canadian production utilising Anne Carson's 2015 translation and advised by feminist scholar Kim Solga privileged attention to the play's discussion of female sexuality. Solga discusses her experiences of being 'feminist-in-residence' on Jillian Keiley's production in 'Making a Feminist Show.'

<sup>19</sup> See the section 'Writing About the Fringe, Writing About Practice' in Chapter 4.

receptions, however, there are absences from parts of the UK – Northern Ireland and Wales, mostly, with Scotland only represented in productions touring from the south of England.

Building on my previous work, I have consulted two main archives to get a sense of the data (the V&A Theatre & Performance archive and the APGRD). While understandably incomplete, the materials held in these archives indicated three periods of particular theatrical interest in *The Bacchae*: the early twentieth century, with the reappearance of play on the stage in 1908; the long 1970s; and the first two decades of the twenty-first century. What struck me as significant about this in terms of my focus on women is that these periods broadly coincide with first, second, and third wave feminism (the debate around the dating of these ‘waves’ notwithstanding). As such, although my overall project is diachronic, in my research I opted to take a synchronic approach to each of these periods. On the basis of my initial investigations at the V&A and APGRD I identified productions imbricated in contemporaneous feminisms. These case study productions form the basis for my first three chapters, covering the period from 1908 to 2015. To extend that investigation, my final synchronic area of investigation is centred on my own theatre practice, considering three separate receptions of *The Bacchae* covering the period from 2014 to 2017; these case studies thus map onto the ongoing emergence of fourth wave feminism.

Chapter 1 looks closely at the role played by McCarthy in the 1908 production. I explore the way that the production emerged amidst the surging wave of feminist activism that came about as a result of the intensifying campaign for women’s suffrage, and how McCarthy’s embodiment of the god served to correlate Dionysiac subversion with the socio-cultural subversiveness of the New Woman. I suggest this is particularly visible in George Bernard

Shaw's 1910 play *Misalliance*, which drew inspiration from McCarthy's Dionysus in the creation of Shaw's most pronounced New Woman character, Lina Szczepanowska.

In Chapter 2, I reappraise the interplay of violence and feminist sisterhood in two adaptations of *The Bacchae*, Maureen Duffy's *Rites* (1968) and Caryl Churchill and David Lan's *A Mouthful of Birds* (1986), from their positions at the beginning and end of the second wave feminist movement respectively. My discussion forms a counterpoint to current scholarship on these plays by situating them fully in the context of *The Bacchae*, considering the ways in which they re-frame Euripides. Crucially, I also explore how this intersects with ways Maureen Duffy and Caryl Churchill sought to respond to developments in second wave feminist activism at the time they were writing. Drawing on Judith Butler's work on kinship, I argue that the live-text of both receptions responded to evolving questions about feminist sisterhood. While *Rites* observes the troubling limitations of organising on the basis of gendered difference, *A Mouthful of Birds* seeks to explode not only gender stereotypes but any simplistic association between gender and the body altogether. Both utilise images of violence in Euripides' play to facilitate these meanings, and both ultimately offer critiques of second wave feminism that anticipate subsequent preoccupations with gender performativity in the 1990s. Moreover, they assert the primacy of the maenad in understanding Dionysiac experience.

I then turn to the twenty-first century British stage with Chapter 3. I consider productions by Kneehigh Theatre Company in 2004-2005, the Northampton Royal & Derngate in 2012, and the Almeida in 2015. In each, I trace the ways that the women involved in the production offered new interpretations of *The Bacchae* by orienting their readings around Agave and the chorus. In this way, they carry forward the work of Duffy and Churchill, but incorporate their own women-centric conceptions of the play into productions framed as

Euripidean (rather than as adaptations). Nevertheless, in each case I consider how a live-text that might be read as feminist was tempered by other factors, most notably by the men holding positions of power that worked on each production. Rather than negating the feminist work, however, I read the productions as symptomatic of a postfeminist sensibility found more widely in British culture in this recent period, a phenomenon characterised by the entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas.

My final chapter looks at London's fringe theatre scene, considering three receptions of *The Bacchae*. In contrast to previous chapters, here I bring into play my own perspective as a theatre-maker, as I was involved in the creative process for all the productions discussed. This serves to focus attention on the dynamics of that creative process, allowing me to consider the ways in which theatre-makers with feminist intentions developed their engagement with *The Bacchae* throughout rehearsal. The first two productions, By Jove Theatre Company's *Before They Told You What You Are* (2014 and 2015) and *Here She Comes* (2017), offer examples of how a collaborative working model in which women have a major stake can radically impact the creation and reading of the live-text. The third production, Lazarus Theatre Company's in 2016, offers a counter-example in which the collaborative approach in the rehearsal room is tempered by a company structure modelled on mainstream institutional hierarchies. Together the productions reassert the idea of the Dionysiac as maenadic experience, drawing attention to the ways this relates to contemporary (post)feminism. Moreover, their fringe status offers an additional dimension to this study, given the fact that fringe theatre-makers can pursue creative possibilities not afforded to those working in the mainstream (both commercial and subsidised).

Taken together, my various chapters offer an original contribution to knowledge in that they significantly expand current understanding of how *The Bacchae* has been thought of and

performed in modern Britain, recovering the valuable contributions of women theatre-makers. In doing so, I hope to open up new ways of approaching the play in performance that circumvent androcentricity. The chapters provide examples of how theatre historians, particularly those working in classical reception studies, can read and recover women-centric receptions of classic texts, incorporating them into the texts' performance histories. In my conclusion, I go on to suggest the findings from my case studies might be formalised as 'maenadic poetics.' I propose that rather than cohering around texts, investigations into classical reception might look to the relationship between representations of women and the theatre-makers reclaiming them. The maenad thus becomes an organising principle, rather than Dionysus or Euripides' play. In this way I aim to provide a foundation for future work that explores not only the intersection between women and the reception of ancient Greek drama, but the ways feminist theatre-makers contest the past in performance to campaign for a better future.



## CHAPTER 1 Dionysus the New Woman

On 10<sup>th</sup> November 1908, *The Bacchae* was performed for the first time on the professional British stage. It was perhaps the first production of the play in a more or less direct English translation of Euripides in history.<sup>20</sup> The role of Dionysus was taken by Lillah McCarthy, who was responsible for the production coming about in the first place – she had pursued the rights to perform Gilbert Murray's 1902 translation, arranged for the hire of the Royal Court Theatre in London for two matinées (the second was on November 17<sup>th</sup>, with a view to doing more), and assembled a network of support from her husband Harley Granville Barker to George Bernard Shaw to the Court's manager A. E. Drinkwater for what were billed as 'Miss Lillah McCarthy's Matinees.' She also engaged her former mentor William Poel, a noted if idiosyncratic director of Shakespeare, to direct the production.

Unfortunately, despite what seems to have been full houses and promising future interest, the project did not go beyond the first two planned matinées thanks to a dispute between Murray and Poel over their differing interpretations of the play. Although, with the help of McCarthy's mediation, both had made several concessions to the other during the project's development – Murray allowed Poel free reign to edit his translation; Poel deferred to Murray's expertise on Greek drama on multiple occasions – Murray ultimately found Poel's

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<sup>20</sup> A burlesque adaptation of the play by two Oxford students, Vincent Amcotts and William Reynell Anson, appeared in 1866. Called *Pentheus*, it is, in Simon Perris' assessment, a 'morality play about the temperance movement'; Perris firmly distinguishes it from Euripides' play in its tone and content (*The Gentle, Jealous God* 48). Hall and Macintosh also refer to *Pentheus* briefly in their chapter on Victorian classical burlesque (381, 383-384).

staging to be intolerable and vetoed it. The return of *The Bacchae* to the stage was therefore brief – but the way it returned is of huge significance to this study.

The fact that McCarthy took the main role should not be taken for granted – in a short, unpublished piece of writing that reads like a programme note, Barker felt the need to gloss the casting as a ‘bold but well-judged step’ (Barker, unpublished note). The resonances of McCarthy’s Dionysus are revealing and far-reaching, situating the production in the theatrical avant-garde of the first years of the twentieth century via the association of her, the Court, and Euripides with the revolutionary work of the Barker-Vedrenne seasons between 1904-1907. This took place more broadly in a context where feminism and socialism were becoming pervasive – if hotly debated – movements in British society. McCarthy herself was closely associated with the Shavian New Woman, a figure whose enactment of reconstituted gender roles on stage both performatively anticipated and agitated for changing social expectations that, by the 1920s, became mainstream. More broadly still, McCarthy, Barker, Shaw, and the Court were associated with the most prominent manifestation of first wave feminist activism: the campaign for women’s suffrage. McCarthy’s production of *The Bacchae* premiered in the heat of the debate around women and the vote, with militant action on the rise, and sat on the threshold of the formation of the most prominent theatrical intersection with the movement, the Actresses’ Franchise League (AFL). Not only was the first meeting of the AFL less than a month after *The Bacchae* premiered, one of the League’s founders, Winifred Mayo, played the role of Agave in the production.<sup>21</sup> McCarthy was also a prominent member of the AFL. Her embodiment of

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<sup>21</sup> For the formation of the AFL, see Stowell (41) and Holledge (49).



Dionysus thus invokes other contexts: the Court under Barker-Vedrenne, the Shavian New Woman, and the suffrage movement.

Although the production was short-lived, McCarthy's Dionysus seems to have had an impact on Shaw. His 1910 play *Misalliance* features the subversive, cross-dressing acrobat Lina Szczepanowska, a character inspired by McCarthy's Dionysus and originally intended for the actress (McCarthy was not ultimately able to take up the role).<sup>22</sup> Lina helpfully demonstrates that McCarthy's Dionysus was, at least for some audience members, a feminist statement. Beyond this, however, there are wider ramifications to giving full consideration to the 1908 production. As I discussed in the introduction, the problematic performance canon and associated culture-text of *The Bacchae* closely links Dionysus with male libido and (homo)eroticism. McCarthy's Dionysus disrupts this, demonstrating that there are other distinct possibilities for interpreting the god outside of the paradigm of sexuality, and beyond his rivalry with Pentheus – this is a Dionysus that reads as chief maenad rather than as divine mirror to his human male opponent. Most significantly, though, McCarthy's involvement in the production challenges the androcentricity of the play's performance histories as they stand, undercutting assumptions that the male creators of *Dionysus in 69* and productions that followed its example rescued *The Bacchae* from theatrical obscurity and made it intelligible for modern audiences. Given the trend for scholarship on this production to construct understanding of it from the perspective of Murray, Poel, or Shaw, this chapter proceeds from the basis that McCarthy was the key player. In doing so, it reassesses the production, its contexts, and its legacy, demonstrating how in 1908 Dionysus returned to the stage in the guise of a New Woman.

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<sup>22</sup> See Morgan (*The Shavian Playground* 193). I discuss the connections between *Misalliance*, Lina, and McCarthy in more detail below.

## New Women, On Stage and Off

By the beginning of the twentieth century, what has been retrospectively termed first wave feminism had an established presence in British society, even if it occupied a position on the margins rather than at the centre. The effects were felt all over the country as the campaign for women's suffrage intensified. 1908 was, in Claire Hirshfield's assessment, a 'time when the suffrage issue was at the boil' ('The Suffragist as Playwright...' 3). Although the peaceful campaigning that characterised the movement in the nineteenth century continued throughout this period, strands of suffrage activism were becoming increasingly militant and openly defiant of the authorities. In February of 1908, Emmeline Pankhurst was imprisoned for the first time. In June, she was one of a huge crowd of activists who gathered in a spectacular demonstration in Hyde Park – the estimated numbers of those in attendance ranged from 300,000 in the *Daily Chronicle* to 500,000 in *The Times* (Purvis 107, 385 n. 61). Some days later, when it became clear that the government remained unmoved, violence broke out: police, suffrage protesters, and an agitated crowd clashed at Parliament Square, and two women, acting independently of Pankhurst's Women's Social and Political Union, threw stones at the windows of 10 Downing Street (109). Pankhurst was again arrested in October, and her trial took place while *The Bacchae* was being rehearsed; she was sent to prison just over two weeks before the production's first performance (116). At least one woman in the cast, Winifred Mayo, was already involved with suffrage activism, and a few weeks after the production there was a further significant development for actresses in support of the cause when the AFL held their first meeting in December – something Mayo was instrumental in setting up.<sup>23</sup> In other words, the day-to-day

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<sup>23</sup> An activist as much as she was an actress, Mayo had been imprisoned early in 1908 for attending a demonstration; she wrote about her prison experiences in a piece for the *Idler* in April of that year (Crawford 393). Naomi Paxton mentions Mayo frequently throughout her study of the AFL, *Stage Rights!*, discussing Mayo's *Idler* piece in some detail (118-119). Hirshfield's discussion of Mayo's work for the AFL

news sensations of demonstrations, arrests, and trials of suffrage activists coloured the immediate political atmosphere into which *The Bacchae* was first performed. Given the established pro-suffrage leanings of many in the women-heavy cast, the subject may well have been discussed in the rehearsal room.

The suffrage campaign dovetailed with the emergence of the New Woman, on stage and off. Olive Banks defines the latter movement as 'a loosening of manners and morals and an emancipation, for the middle-class girl in particular, from those suffocating conventions that had restricted her within the narrow world of Victorian morality' (180). In theatre – at least on the London stage – a number of writers began to be associated with their representations of the New Woman, including Henrik Ibsen, J. M. Barrie, and John Masefield. The most prominent writer in this regard, however, was Shaw, many of whose female characters were 'the quintessence of the New Woman' (Watson 114). Shaw himself theorised the New Woman as 'the unwomanly woman' in an essay that has been described by Elsie Adams as

...a revolutionary feminist document, with its analysis of the social conditioning causing women to sacrifice self for others; its view of a male-ruled society dictating that women minister to male appetites; its argument that 'the domestic career is no more natural to all women than the military career is natural to all men'; and its insistence that female rebellion is the first step to emancipation. (156-157)

For Shaw, only when a woman 'repudiates her womanliness' – her duty to her husband, children, society, law, everyone but herself – can she be emancipated (qtd. in Hall and

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also makes clear Mayo's close, committed involvement with the group, working behind the scenes as often as she was on stage ('The Suffragist as Playwright...' 4). Given the timeline of the production of *The Bacchae* and the formation of the AFL, it is probable that plans were being discussed in and around rehearsal, and in the dressing room.

Macintosh 488). The rejection of Victorian gender roles that Shaw discusses, manifesting in changes of behaviour and fashion, had its root in the late nineteenth century and would go on to flourish in the 1920s (Banks 181); as such, 1908 was a period of transition and growth.<sup>24</sup>

Despite some theatrical success in the late nineteenth century, Shaw's name was made under the Barker-Vedrenne management from 1904 onwards. Just as the New Woman struggled against Victorian gender norms, in Shaw's assessment the Barker-Vedrenne seasons, performed by a stock company at the Court and, latterly, the Savoy Theatre, worked against the prevailing aesthetic of the Victorian stage ('An Aside' 1). The Court thus became a centre for avant-garde practice that espoused a politics loosely defined as socialist and feminist (albeit through a Shavian filter). McCarthy later referred to this venture as the 'Court mission' (*Myself and My Friends* 62). It proved to be enormously influential: C. B. Purdom, writing in 1955, claims that 'no theatrical enterprise of this century has left a deeper mark upon the theatrical history of London' (26); Dennis Kennedy, writing three decades later, concurs (21). The management introduced audiences to a 'new world of drama, of acting, of production style, and of performance scheduling' (21). The programme was eclectic, often featuring experimental and controversial new work – Shavian comedies, Ibsenite New Drama, and at least one suffrage play, Elizabeth Robins' *Votes for Women!* This mix attracted an audience that Kennedy describes as a 'precious amalgam of Shavians, Fabians, feminists, lovers of the Court idea, [and] theatrical pioneers' (30). A major part of the audience were middle-class women, particularly at the matinées that Barker and Vedrenne used to trial new work; Lynton Hudson quotes a

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<sup>24</sup> Viv Gardner and Susan Rutherford's edited volume *The New Woman and Her Sisters: Feminism and Theatre 1850-1914* is prefaced with a very helpful timeline of this period, charting the emergence of the New Woman across the cultural, theatrical, and social and political spheres, and recording the concurrent rise of suffrage activism (xv-xxi).

contemporary observer as noting 'the female element predominates at something like twelve to one' (129-130). These women had 'grown frustrated by the constricted roles for which they were apparently destined and bored by both the monotonous routine of social duties and the pursuit of trivial pleasure' – the intellectually stimulating and feminist-inflected drama offered by the Court thus appealed over the programming on offer elsewhere (Hirshfield 1). It was against this background that *The Bacchae* was staged, appearing at the Court the season after the Barker-Vedrenne management folded – perhaps with the direct intention of attracting the 'precious amalgam' of an audience back to the venue.

In addition to Shaw, Barker, and McCarthy, the 'Court mission' brought Euripides to London theatregoers' attention as a fashionable, performable playwright. Via Murray's translations, Euripides became the second most performed playwright under the Barker-Vedrenne management (Shaw was first).<sup>25</sup> As Edith Hall and Fiona Macintosh have demonstrated, this is partly the result of an association between Euripides and modern writers such as Ibsen and Shaw; they cite W. H. Salter's 1911 *Essays on Two Moderns*, which describes Euripides as 'the Greek Ibsen' and the 'Attic Shaw' (490). In this view, Euripides was an ancient precursor to the New Drama of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, putting women and their perspectives at the centre of his tragedies. Murray was a major influence in shaping this conception – in his view, Euripides was patently a feminist writer (West 69). McCarthy

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<sup>25</sup> A revival of Barker's *Hippolytus*, originally staged at the Lyric Theatre in May 1904, in fact opened the management's first season in October of that year. This was followed by *The Trojan Women* in 1905, *Electra* in 1906 and *Medea* after the management moved to the Savoy in 1907, in what became the final season. For further discussion on the influence of Greek tragedy on Shaw, Barker, and the 'Court mission', see Hall and Macintosh 492ff.

subscribed to this view, quoting Murray in her 1932 lecture to the Royal Society almost verbatim:

Euripides was an aggressive champion of women ... For the average stupid Athenian it was wicked for a woman to have any character. Wicked for her to take part in public life. Wicked for her to acquire learning. The women of Ibsen and Shaw shocked the Victorians out of their hypocrisy as Euripides shocked the men and women of his day. ('Euripides'; cf. Murray, *Euripides and His Age* 19)

For McCarthy, Euripides' plays presented prime material from the perspectives of both performer and feminist. As with Shaw, the parts were challenging and controversial, but they came with the additional benefit of being able to offer an opportunity for virtuoso displays of talent while claiming significant cultural capital from a canonical part. They had value beyond the stage, as well, that fed into feminist politics of the time: McCarthy attests to reciting Medea's 'Women of Corinth' speech at suffrage meetings (Hall and Macintosh 514; McCarthy, 'Euripides').



Figure 1: Lillah McCarthy and Harley Granville Barker in Shaw's *Man and Superman* (1905). V&A Theatre and Performance Archive.

What emerges from contemporary accounts of Shaw, Barker, and McCarthy's work during this period is a distinct sense of their actions as revolutionary, striving to shake up the Victorian world they had been born into. This thread runs through Shaw's writing, the rationale for and practice of the Court seasons, and the understanding of Euripides as having had the same impact on Athens in his own time. For McCarthy, her performance as Ann Whitefield in Shaw's *Man and Superman* (1905) seems to have been a critical moment in which her feminist politics and her theatre-making intersected (Hirshfield, 'The Actresses' Franchise League...' 150;

see Fig. 1). When McCarthy was asked shortly before she died in 1960 what she thought made Shaw's plays avant-garde, she said that '[h]e put a woman on the stage. He knocked down the nonsense of Victorian women in the plays, before Ann Whitefield; and Ann Whitefield came and knocked them all endways' (interview 7). This is in keeping with a remarkable passage from her autobiography, written just under thirty years prior to the interview:

[Ann] was a "new woman" and she made a new woman of me. The women of the previous day, on or off the stage, had been of the stage, stagey. Ann was of the earth, earthy. ... From being a horrid warning, Ann became a model. Men may have looked askance at her - she was not nice - but women with truer courage stared at her and discovered that she was no mannequin owing the semblance of life to draperies. She was a living woman - one of themselves. Women, many of them, have told me that Ann brought them to life and that they re-modelled themselves upon Ann's pattern. ... Shaw, with his love of paradox, must have been delighted when he thought that the Court - symbol of all that is decorous and decent - was become the scene of women's emancipation; a double emancipation, for Ann set the leading lady - and with her all the ladies of the theatre - free, and she set the world of women free. Whenever the slim girl of the present day lights up a cigarette whilst she stands waiting for a train, I feel I must go up and say to her, as Shaw once said to me: "Why, you're Ann Whitefield," and when Amy Johnson flies across the deserts and the seas from here to Cape Town and back again, I want to tell her "Ann Whitefield gave you those strong and lovely wings." Mrs. Pankhurst, who Heaven knows never lacked resolution, herself told me that Ann Whitefield has strengthened her purpose and fortified her courage. (63-64)

While McCarthy's performance as Ann may not have had quite the profound impact she suggests it did – her eloquently written memoirs have a tendency to mythologise her life – the passage clearly demonstrates the way in which her work in this period constituted a kind of feminist praxis that originated in the theatre but also extended beyond it. The Court becomes the 'scene of women's emancipation,' with Shaw providing characters that modelled the New Woman – and even Pankhurst, and the whole suffrage movement by implication, benefits. At



the centre of this is McCarthy, embodying Shaw's New Woman on the Court stage, and inspiring the women who watch her in an act of feminist inspiration and solidarity. Given that *The Bacchae* in 1908 was authored by the 'Attic Shaw,' was staged at the Court, and featured McCarthy in an extremely visible way as producer and star, it follows that the production emerged from the same context of feminist praxis as McCarthy's other work.

### ***The Bacchae* in 1908**

How did *The Bacchae* come to be staged in November of 1908? What did it look and sound like? And what led Murray to withdraw his support for the project? As I have previously discussed, what is known about the production has been skewed by Murray's dominant voice in the archive, and the project's relevance in relation to his career. From this perspective, it is difficult to see the production as anything other than an interesting but ultimately failed experiment amidst Murray's numerous other achievements, academic and theatrical. Often this 'failure' narrative is accompanied by the intimation that the most significant part of the production was Murray's translation and its legacy. Simon Perris' chapter on Murray's text, for example, addresses the production only in passing, noting that '[t]he show fizzled; Murray vetoed it after only two matinées' (*The Gentle, Jealous God* 60). Fiona Macintosh and Erika Fischer-Lichte both discuss the production in the context of Wole Soyinka's adaptation of *The Bacchae* in the 1970s, on which Murray's translation was an influence (Macintosh 156-159; Fischer-Lichte 51-52). Fischer-Lichte draws on George Sampatakakis' discussion – the latter being the most extensive analysis of the production to date – picking up the 'failure' narrative in the process. How Fischer-Lichte accounts for this is indicative of the bias towards Murray at work in scholarship on the production:

Although Murray and Poel had an extensive correspondence on the tragedy, in the course of which Murray agreed on some slight changes, on attending the performance he was very upset to find the tragedy robbed of what in his reading and translation was essential to it. He refused to allow the production to continue after the first two matinees. How the audience in these performances responded is not known. However, it is to be assumed that if it had been enthusiastic or show any signs of deeper involvement, Murray would not have insisted on the end of its run. Apparently, it was a failure even in this respect - which would explain why on professional stages almost no other production followed over the next sixty years. (52)

Fischer-Lichte makes major assumptions about both Murray's consideration of the audience and the audience themselves. She follows Sampatakakis in taking her facts from Murray's account, in which the authority of his reading of *The Bacchae* was sullied in performance. Perplexingly, she then uses this version of events to blame the production for the lack of theatrical interest in the following decades.

The reality was quite different. There is no evidence that Murray had any consideration for the audience other than that they would be led to misunderstand *The Bacchae* as a result of Poel's staging. In fact, he withdrew his support for the production after seeing the dress rehearsal, proceeding to miss the first matinée. McCarthy and Drinkwater both urged him to see the second before finalising his decision (McCarthy to Murray, 12 Nov 1908; Drinkwater to Murray, 13 Nov 1908). It is unclear whether Murray saw the second performance. In any case, although Murray received negative criticisms from some friends who did see the public performances (Lodge to Murray, 13 Nov 1908; Bantock to Murray, 16 Nov 1908), he was also made aware that there were some enthusiastic responses. Drinkwater reported 'very appreciated comments' from such authorities on theatre as Shaw, William Archer, and James Galsworthy; there was also the promise of encouraging box office returns for future performances

(Drinkwater to Murray, 13 Nov 1908, 14 Nov 1908). Others had positive things to say about the production, in private and in print. Among the positive comments made in correspondence, Shaw had good things to say ('My dear Barker' 139), and Mary Ponsonby enjoyed herself so much that she wrote to McCarthy straight away to tell her so (11 Nov 1908). Poel himself described the audience as 'spellbound,' though he of course may be more than a little biased (Poel to Gumme, 8 Jan 1909). In print, the review in *The Era* praised the performance as 'intelligent and artistic,' commenting that the 'acting was excellent all round' ('The Bacchae of Euripides'). There were also positive comments in *The Saturday Review* (Beerbohm) and *The Times* ('Court Theatre'). Even the mostly negative review in *The Sketch* had good things to say about McCarthy (E. F. S.). The most conservative assessment in the light of this evidence was that the play's reception was mixed. Regardless, what is crucial is that the audience and their response to the play had little to do with Murray's decision. Rather the production faltered on a tricky transition from the literary to the performative. If this was the first production of the play, all those who knew it – Murray included – understood it only as a text, as an object of scholarly theory. It was the process of trying to bring the live-text about, making sense of it as performance within the socio-cultural frameworks of the time, that caused problems.

When McCarthy and Poel were preparing to stage the play, they looked to Murray to 'explain' it to them. He provided a lot of advice, but his theatrical vision was based on his literary interpretation of Euripides' Greek text. Poel in turn based his reading on Murray's translation – which was already inflected by the latter's idiosyncratic scholarly views – although he reached different conclusions. The production's early end was quite simply a result of this difference of interpretation, and of Murray's absolute refusal to see *The Bacchae* on stage as anything other than his theories realised in performance. This is not to say the production was perfect and

Murray was entirely in the wrong – there were other difficulties, particularly between Poel and the cast, who also struggled with their director's vision. To fully appreciate these, and to get a fresh perspective on what the production was like, it is necessary to give an account of the project's genesis and development that considers the full range of evidence, moving beyond the narrative of Murray's displeasure that ultimately ends in the notion that the production failed.

The origins of the production go back to the final months of the Barker-Vedrenne management in 1907. Encouraged by the success of their work at the Court, Barker and Vedrenne moved to the much larger Savoy Theatre for the autumn of that year and needed 'something sensational' to fill the space (Barker qtd. in Salmon 239). It was then that Murray first mooted *The Bacchae* as a possibility, but Barker did not see the play as a serious theatrical proposition – he was worried that it might be, to use his term, 'potty' (Barker to Murray, Aug 1907). Instead Barker opted for *Medea*, which, as Hall and Macintosh point out, was a timely choice, performed as it was 'against the upsurge of public interest in the movement for women's suffrage' (511). McCarthy, who had been barred from appearing in productions directed by her husband thanks to a ruling from Vedrenne, campaigned for the lead role, writing to Murray and Shaw – though ultimately this was in vain.<sup>26</sup> After it went to Edyth Olive, McCarthy described herself as being 'broken hearted' (qtd. in Kennedy 29), which correlates with her politics, her ambitions to be a 'tragedienne' playing 'all big parts' of the canon (interview 7), and her self-professed affection for Greek drama, which she described in her autobiography as 'the loveliest thing on earth' (*Myself and My Friends* 291). In these memoirs, McCarthy suggests (albeit with

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<sup>26</sup> See Kennedy 29. McCarthy was allowed to appear in Shaw's work as he directed these productions himself. For more on *Medea* at the Savoy, especially the opposition of McCarthy, Murray, Shaw, and (to a certain extent) Barker to the casting of Edyth Olive, see Hall and Macintosh (516) as well as the first section of Hall, 'Medea and British Legislation Before the First World War.'

the air of hindsight) that she had wanted to stage a Greek play for many years prior to *The Bacchae* ('all the time I was learning how to act and making my way in the stage' 293). Despite her disappointment over *Medea*, her chance came the following summer after the Savoy season proved unsuccessful and the Barker-Vedrenne management folded.

The end of her husband's venture and his pursuit of other projects in the autumn of 1908 also provided McCarthy with the opportunity to return to a path she had abruptly left prior to her meeting Barker and Shaw a few years earlier. This was something she suppressed in her memoirs but, fortunately, spoke about shortly before her death. After touring across the world for a decade with actor-manager Wilson Barrett's company, she returned to London with expectations that were dashed by Barrett's untimely death in 1904:

I was to be a manager on me [sic] own--playing Phaedra and all the great parts ... If Barrett hadn't died, he would have financed me with somebody else ... and I should have gone into business with some big theatrical syndicate ... a limited liability company. On my own. ... But unfortunately, he died. And I was left a little orphan starting out again and that was that. ... Instead of going out and playing Phaedra and [indistinguishable] and Lady Macbeth, all big parts, I had to come and play in MAN AND SUPERMAN (interview 6; ellipses mine)

McCarthy's desire to play great parts and stage Greek drama thus appears to have combined with her ambitions to be a theatre manager when, in 1908, the opportunity arose to put on something under her own name. In the summer she had been engaged by impresario Charles Frohman to appear in J. M. Barrie's New Woman drama *What Every Woman Knows*. It was 'a negative sort of part' that 'left [her] time for other things' (*Myself and My Friends* 293), so she wrote to Murray in July to ask permission to produce one of his translations (McCarthy to Murray, 2 July 1908). She wrote again in September to enquire specifically after *The Bacchae*

(McCarthy to Murray, 20 Sept 1908). The second letter is framed as a serious business proposition, with McCarthy attaching a business prospectus. The additional document outlines a plan to produce *The Bacchae* alongside John Masefield's *The Tragedy of Nan*, which had been rejected by Vedrenne the previous year because McCarthy had been attached to the title role (Kennedy 29). After his management with Vedrenne ended, Barker had in fact staged Masefield's play with McCarthy at the Royalty Theatre in May of 1908, and so McCarthy's plan to combine her prospective work with a tried-and-tested success both demonstrates her business savviness and anticipates the joint management programme with Barker that would eventually come to fruition in 1911. On this occasion, however, the more ambitious aspects of McCarthy's plan did not develop, and only *The Bacchae* was produced. As Barker had no interest in directing the play – he 'time and again shrunk from the experiment' (unpublished note) – McCarthy turned to their former mentor Poel instead.

It was at this stage that the first signs of trouble began to emerge. Murray was uneasy at the choice of Poel for director, so McCarthy proposed a meeting between the three of them at Oxford on the 11<sup>th</sup> October (McCarthy to Murray, 1 Oct 1908). It was only after this meeting that Murray finally consented to the project. It is unclear exactly what was agreed between Poel and Murray, but after the production Poel told his friend that he had insisted he must have a 'free hand' in order to 'strengthen the construction where [he] thought it was weak' (Poel to Gumme, 8 Jan 1909). This contradicts, however, Poel's earlier written reassurances to Murray, in which he claimed that 'there's not a line in the text ... that my stage business would violate the meaning of' (Poel to Murray, 28 Sept 1908). Poel was reportedly surprised that Murray consented to the project after the Oxford meeting – and perhaps this emboldened Poel to be more radical than originally intended. From Poel's existing copy of the text it is apparent that

large parts of the play were cut, which was not entirely uncharacteristic of him, as his work on Shakespeare demonstrates (Kennedy 151). These edits were predominantly focused on the chorus (the largely intact second ode aside), Agave's scene, and Dionysus' appearance *ex machina*. Poel felt that the play was 'a satire or its [sic] nothing' (Poel to Gumme, 8 Jan 1909) – a satire, apparently, on intoxication, in both the religious and alcoholic sense. The edits Poel made to the script were an effort to eliminate 'digressions' supposedly emphasised by Murray:

Murray accentuates all Euripides' weaknesses and glories in them in the same way that Shaw does in some of his unnecessary digressions and elevates them into fine art. This is because not one of these men care a scrap for the art of the theatre as an art for compelling and sustaining attention by arousing human emotions which when once aroused resent the introduction of superfluous conversation which is not in harmony with the emotions that have been aroused. (Poel to Gumme, 8 Jan 1909)

It is clear that for Poel, the satirical thrust of the play lay in Pentheus' narrative – his encounters with Dionysus, which are left almost untouched in terms of edits, and his eventual journey to the mountain. The chorus, Agave, and all discussion relating to Dionysus' divinity were inartistic 'Shavian' embellishment – though it is not quite clear whether Poel blamed them on Euripides or Murray. Certainly Poel's letter to his friend Arnold Gomme in January 1909 suggests he sought to improve on Barker and Murray's *Medea*, which he described 'the most appallingly dull performance I had ever sat through' (Poel to Gomme, 8 Jan 1909). This deliberate movement away from the Shavian qualities of Euripides, and from Barker's practice, foreshadowed the difficulties encountered in rehearsals for *The Bacchae*, where Poel came to clash with both McCarthy and the chorus.

To prepare for the project, Poel visited the British Museum to examine ancient Greek vases and statues (Poel to Murray, 14 Oct 1908). His proposal to copy the vases in the staging

indicates something of his vision of Dionysus and the maenads as distinctly static. Poel described this staging as 'full of repose, dignity, and grace' in order to make a clever contrast with such a 'savage story' (Poel to Murray, 25 Oct 1908). The physical implications for Dionysus were balked at by McCarthy, as Poel complained to Murray after the first week of rehearsals:

At present I am unable to make Barker [McCarthy] happy in her part. I think that the suppressed quiet style does not suit her and she wants to force the part in a way that I think may be inartistic. If the Bacchus could only do nothing but stand still, I can conceive an extraordinary effect. If Gods can do what the Bacchus can do, they don't want to mess about the stage dressed as wizards and show how clever they are. This cleverness is what they do. Miss Barker has not yet grasped this & at present we are pulling in opposite directions, which may lead in disaster to the play. (25 Oct 1908)

Clearly McCarthy objected to being told to 'do nothing but stand still.' The tensions continued, with Barker reporting to Murray in the third and final week of rehearsals that 'Poel and Lillah are in the depths of despair' (4 Nov 1908). Shaw's assessment was that 'Poel doesn't understand Lillah technically, and doesn't understand Dionyseus [sic] temperamentally' ('My dear Barker' 139). The indication seems to be that McCarthy and Poel had fundamental disagreements about the former's technical approach to her part and her understanding of what performing Dionysus should constitute in performance terms – she seemed to think that the god of frenzied maenads should do more than simply be still.

McCarthy was not the only member of the cast to object to Poel's staging when it came to technique and physicality. Poel conceived of the chorus as

four women, two sitting at the side of the proscenium arch facing inwards, two facing outwards on either side of the flight of steps ... it was intended that [the chorus] should remain in these positions throughout the play and then make a dignified exit (Speaight 170)



The women making up the chorus objected: Janette Ranken reportedly told Poel that they 'could only hope to be able to *crawl* off, using the thyrsus as a crutch, after sitting for several hours in one position' and as a result they were allowed 'at a given cue to turn and face in the opposite direction for one act, and then, for the last, to resume our first position'; Ranken remarks that 'we hobbled off creaking, even so' (qtd. in Speaight 170, emphasis in original). There were further choral figures in the play that did move – a trio of dancers who occupied a very small space in the centre of the stage – but these remained unspeaking (Beerbohm). In this way, movement and voice were completely separated in Poel's staging: the maenads who moved were unable to speak, and the maenads that spoke remained mostly static.

What few choral lines remained in Poel's edit were spoken and chanted in a highly stylised way. Ranken recalls that Poel imposed strict vocal exercises in rehearsal that made the women sound like bleating goats, and that for performance the four speaking chorus members were given alternate words; in one particular instance where the last line of an ode had three words, this was shared between them: 'Death ... O ... Miser ... Able!' (qtd. in Loper 195). While some scholarship on Poel has seen Ranken's remarks as an indication of his diligent attention to words and voice that characterised much of the director's career, the extreme approach taken perhaps also demonstrates something of the satirical effect Poel was attempting to produce.<sup>27</sup>

The script owned by another chorus member, Helen Macdonald, notes that at certain lines she had to raise and lower a bunch of grapes – an example is Pentheus' retort to Dionysus after the disguised god breaks free from imprisonment, 'even wilder are these tales of thine' (Murray, *The Bacchae* 40). The contrast between these stately, grape-wielding, chanting

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<sup>27</sup> See, for example, Loper (1953) and Falocco (2006).

maenads and Mayo's frenzied Agave seems to have been a deliberate choice, but it was found jarring by reviewer Max Beerbohm, who described Poel's presentation of the character as a woman engaging in a 'a very tame little skirt-dance and twittering her triumph, while she timidly waggles in the air the head of a white plaster cast from the antique.' As Speaight notes, this may have had the intention of satire, but it was perceived as silliness (172). This kind of staging may have jarred with the cast's expectations: McCarthy seems to have envisioned the wild god Dionysus as having a more energetic temperament than Poel would allow, and perhaps the chorus, made to sit still for long periods and subject to Poel's highly stylised use of voice, thought they too might have played 'inspired damsels' (to use Murray's term) somewhat differently.

Throughout this process, Murray was consulted and kept up to date by Poel, McCarthy, and Barker, but it appears he was not physically present until the dress rehearsal. His impending interpretive clash with Poel was therefore secondary to the problems of the rehearsal process, of voice and movement, encountered with McCarthy and the cast. Nevertheless, Murray was dismayed at the actualities of the staging, particularly in regard to the textual edits, as Barker's telegram to Murray after the first performance indicates (Barker to Murray, 14 Nov 1908). The final scene proved to be a sticking point. In his correspondence with Murray, Poel expressed bewilderment at this part of the play:

[e]ither Euripides does not visualise stage action well, or the Greek conscience felt differently about pain to what a modern audience felt ... I can't realise how a modern audience would accept anything so painful as to have to face that bier [with Pentheus' fragmented body] and at the same time show the feeling of sad sentiment that Cadmus's words demand (28 Sept 1908)

Poel's solution was to direct the chorus to '[keep] up a constant circular movement' in front of the scene, 'opening out every now and then when the bier would be seen and the dialogue heard' (28 Sept 1908). Afterwards, Dionysus – a trickster to Poel's mind – was denied his full speech *ex machina*, with the moment manifesting in a brief appearance by McCarthy 'as a statue in Ivory & Gold speaking only two lines' (McCarthy, Note to Murray). Poel, approaching the play from the perspective of a director, considered Euripides' bloody ending 'too painful an incident' to witness unimpeded (Poel to Murray, 28 Sept 1908); from Murray's point of view, Poel 'had completely failed to grasp the ritual significance of the play's final scene' (Macintosh 158).

This was a consequence of the play's first transition – at least in living memory – from page to stage, resulting in a clash between literary reading and the sensibilities and practicalities of contemporary theatre. It was also a contest over authenticity of meaning, of what this play should properly be about. It is clear that the production did not signify as Murray wished it to (whatever that may have looked like to him). From some of the tepid reviews, particularly Beerbohm's, it is also unclear whether Poel's satirical vision came across successfully to the audience. Murray and Poel's dispute led to the project's premature end, something McCarthy and the predominantly female cast would surely have found frustrating, if predictable; as suffragist, actress, and writer Elizabeth Robins remarked in her memoirs, in this period, 'the masters of the theatre were men' (33-34). But during the performances, neither Poel's nor Murray's view mattered – the two men's struggles to control what the play meant were, in fact, invisible on those afternoons in which the show took place. What *was* visible – and this is absolutely clear from the surviving evidence – was McCarthy's Dionysus. Thus, in the live-text for most of the audience, the play's meanings were structured around McCarthy and her fellow cast members' embodiment of the words, rather than any specialist scholarly readings someone

like Murray would have been familiar with. The tensions around how McCarthy signified in performance are therefore a crucial part of how this production and its legacy can be understood, with particular relevance for the play's later performance history.

### McCarthy's Dionysus

While Murray was ultimately dissatisfied with Poel's efforts, he had no problem with McCarthy. Less than a week after the second matinée – and after Poel had agreed to pursue the project no further (Poel to Murray, 19 Nov 1908) – McCarthy wrote to Murray to ask whether she might retain the rights to perform his translation (McCarthy to Murray, 23 Nov 1908). Proposing a 'further series of matinees [sic] in probably the early part of next year,' she was willing to completely scrap Poel's staging if necessary, and, on this condition, Murray extended the lease until Christmas 1909 (ibid.). For one reason or another, the further performances did not transpire, but the agreement underlines both Murray's happiness with McCarthy – and, presumably, her Dionysus – and McCarthy's critical role in orchestrating events. This correlates with the evidence provided by the surviving production ephemera – the programme (Fig. 2), and photographs of McCarthy as Dionysus taken for a feature on the front page of *The Sketch* (Figs. 3, 4, and 5; figure 3 was the image that was ultimately published) – that emphasise McCarthy's centrality.<sup>28</sup> As I have previously mentioned, the programme framed proceedings under the banner of McCarthy's name, and this would have been reinforced when she was the

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<sup>28</sup> The programme and the photographs are amongst Lillah McCarthy's papers held at the V&A Theatre and Performance archive – they appear to have been part of her extensive collection of newspaper cuttings and other material, indicating they held some significance to her. As further evidence of McCarthy's key role in proceedings, the actor playing Pentheus, Esme Percy, wrote a postcard to McCarthy probably around early 1909 (a picture of Dionysus on the back) asking whether *she* intended to revive *The Bacchae* (Percy to McCarthy, n.d.).

first thing audiences saw at beginning of the performance, an astonishing sight captured by the photographs.



Figure 2: Cover of the programme for the 1908 production of *The Bacchae*. V&A Theatre and Performance Archive.



Figure 3: Recoloured photograph of McCarthy as Dionysus. V&A Theatre and Performance Archive.



*Figure 4: Recoloured photograph of McCarthy as Dionysus. V&A Theatre and Performance Archive.*



*Figure 5: Photograph of McCarthy as Dionysus. V&A Theatre and Performance Archive.*

Dionysus' striking appearance is significant. Like Poel, McCarthy took Murray's suggestion and studied vases at the British Museum for inspiration for her look (*Myself and My Friends* 294; Poel to Murray, 14 Oct 1908). Sampatakakis suggests that McCarthy modelled her

appearance on Caravaggio's famous *Bacchus* ('Bakkhai-model' 138), though this would seem highly unlikely given that the painting was not discovered until 1913 (Hibbard 39).

Sampatakakis thus reads figure 3 as affecting 'pervasive Carravagian innocence,' with McCarthy demonstrating 'naiveté in her looks' that extends to a 'martyr-like nervousness in which she holds the phallic *thyrsos*' ('Bakkhai-model' 138, 139). The anachronistic comparisons to Caravaggio aside, Sampatakakis' reading assumes that the portrait affirms Murray's advice to McCarthy to portray the god as a martyr (139). McCarthy may have indeed listened to Murray, but far from naivety, innocence, and nervousness, I would suggest that figure 3 demonstrates quiet determination – closer to McCarthy's own stated conception of the god as 'strong, calm, magnetic' (*Myself and My Friends* 294). McCarthy confronts the camera face on, fixing it with a piercing gaze. Figure 5 suggests graceful, sweeping, imperious movement in contrast to Poel's static vision. Furthermore, in figure 4 she extends her thyrsus out in front of her as if it were a staff – here she is more Prospero than Ariel, far from the 'innocent genderless adolescent' Sampatakakis suggests ('Bakkhai-model' 139).<sup>29</sup> In fact, in terms of theatrical precedent McCarthy recalls most prominently actor-manager Eliza Vestris' Oberon in the latter's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at Covent Garden in 1840. This production 'presented a very suggestive image of female power which was centred on fairyland,' with Vestris symbolically reinforcing her position as 'manager of the home of the national theatre' by playing 'the powerful director figure' of Oberon (Schafer, *MsDirecting Shakespeare* 198). In this role, Vestris appeared 'with her legs on display and with a slender, phallic spear beside her' (199). Like Vestris, McCarthy was embodying a male figure with substantial power over the action –

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<sup>29</sup> In Sampatakakis' defence, he understands figure 3 to be the only extant portrait of McCarthy as Dionysus (137). This may have been the situation when he was writing in c. 2001-2004; in any case, he evidently did not have access to the other portraits I discuss here.

Hall describes Dionysus as ‘simultaneously author, costume designer, choreographer and artistic director’ in *The Bacchae* (‘Introduction’ 10) – and doing so by combining signifiers of femaleness (her legs) with symbols of masculine authority (the phallic thyrsus). As a result, far from neutralising her gender, I would argue that McCarthy’s costume draws attention to her body while simultaneously asserting her authority in the proceedings.

Vestris can be found at the beginnings of a tradition of hypersexual cross-dressed performances by women in nineteenth century music hall.<sup>30</sup> As Elizabeth Schafer points out, however, ‘by appropriating the role of Oberon so successfully, Vestris helped nurture a tradition which increased the number of roles for women in nineteenth-century Shakespeare’ (*MsDirecting Shakespeare* 199). Vestris engaged with Greek drama as well as Shakespeare, and McCarthy’s Dionysus is part of this legacy.<sup>31</sup> The amount of leg McCarthy’s costume reveals borders on scandalising for the period, found only in the titillating performances Vestris was famous for and in ballet.<sup>32</sup> There is a genealogy for such costumes in the Victorian tradition of classical burlesque, a tradition that also offers a genealogy for the theatrical New Woman more broadly (Macintosh, ‘Medea Transposed’ 76).<sup>33</sup> McCarthy clearly meant for her enterprise to be

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<sup>30</sup> See Bratton (237-241). For Vestris’ role in this tradition specifically, see Fletcher.

<sup>31</sup> See Macintosh, ‘Medea Transposed’ (79-80, *passim*)

<sup>32</sup> Although classically-inspired dance might have provided McCarthy with an artistic defence of her revealing attire, intriguingly the archives at the Royal Ballet school reveal very little in the way of precedent for such a costume, the major exception being Isadora Duncan (discussed below; my thanks to Anna Meadmore for helping me to negotiate these archives). But McCarthy’s Dionysus seemed to have been a part of the zeitgeist, in which artists across Europe drew on classical antiquity (often visually inspired by vase paintings) to push the boundaries of art: in Paris in 1912, Nijinsky staged *Afternoon of a Faun*, and the following year Stravinski’s *The Rite of Spring* premiered to apocryphal riots from the audience.

<sup>33</sup> The front cover of Laura Monró-Gaspar’s *Victorian Classical Burlesques: A Critical Anthology* features an image of Ruther Herbert playing Diana in a burlesque from around 1860. The image is an instructive precedent to McCarthy’s portrait as Dionysus. Although Herbert’s costume is less revealing, her lower legs are still mostly visible. The comparison is especially fitting as Diana is another deity associated with



received as high art rather than burlesque, but the visual appeal generated by her Dionysus is evident. The critic in *The Times*, for example, wrote: 'it can be imagined how compelling a figure Miss Lillah McCarthy looks with the ivy and grapes in her hair, and the flame-coloured tunic under her tiger-skin, a strange Eastern god full of grace and beauty, and of a subtle perfume-like charm' ('Court Theatre'; McCarthy quotes this description verbatim in *Myself and My Friends*, suggesting she was flattered by it). The review printed in *The Sketch* similarly suggests that McCarthy's 'delightful' performance was 'a joy for the eyes' (E. F. S.). Sampatakakis' rationale for reading McCarthy's body as genderless is based on the idea that her casting came about because Poel believed that having a woman play the god would help approximate the androgynous aspect of Euripides' Dionysus ('Bakkhai-model' 142). Yet even if the reviews acknowledged McCarthy's interpretation as 'effeminate' (E. F. S.), her sexualised female body clearly remained visible in their comments on her beauty. That *The Sketch* printed figure 3 on the cover between the two matinée performances suggests that the photograph was intended to have appeal to the magazine's readers. It also suggests that this was a strategic marketing decision made – or least assented to – by McCarthy.

McCarthy's costume seen in the context of her wider career confirms that she was not especially attempting to be read as male. Although women playing male roles was far from unheard of, as I have mentioned, McCarthy was never associated with it; certainly in 1908 audiences would have been most familiar with her in female roles (figure 1 demonstrates how even the New Woman Ann Whitefield was overtly feminine in appearance). In fact, those seeing the matinée of *The Bacchae* could have gone to an evening performance of Barrie's *What Every*

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McCarthy – in Shaw's preface to McCarthy's memoirs, he recalls that when they first met, she had the 'figure and gait of a Diana' ('An Aside' 5).

*Woman Knows* and seen her play Lady Sybil Lazenby. An illuminating comparison can be made with her performance as Viola in Barker's 1912 production of *Twelfth Night*. For McCarthy's disguise as the male Cesario to be read effectively on stage, almost all her skin is covered up, including her legs, and her tunic falls to below the knee rather than the thigh, which was the case with Dionysus (see fig. 6). In an innovative move, McCarthy was instructed by Barker to play Cesario as a convincing male youth, and in her diary she notes that 'Viola is a big strain played as a leading man' (qtd. in *Myself and My Friends* 161). Christine Dymkowski observes that critics noted Cesario's masculine emphasis (54-55). It seems that for Dionysus, there was no such struggle to perform *as* male, and critics seem happy to take up the invitation to read McCarthy's body as female.



Figure 6: Photograph of McCarthy as Viola/Cesario in Barker's *Twelfth Night* (1912). V&A Theatre and Performance Archive.

A final indicator that McCarthy was signalling her femaleness is in the specifics of her chosen hairstyle. While Sampatakakis observes that McCarthy's costume is historically inaccurate, he notes that 'some historical accuracy is introduced with her maenadic *plokamos*'

('Bakkhai-model' 139-140). This he glosses as a hairstyle that was an 'indication of ecstasy and abandonment either of the household, or from self-control' (140 n. 519). Even if this choice to adopt a signifier of maenadic subversion was not a deliberate one on McCarthy's part, it recalls the way in which maenadism in this period resonated within a feminist context. This context offers a better means to understand how McCarthy signified in her production of *The Bacchae* – as neither innocent nor pornographic, nor even as Dionysus exactly, but rather as a maenad.

Yopie Prins observes that in the late nineteenth century, 'increasingly maenads served as metaphors for the revolutionary gender politics of first-wave feminism ... Greek maenads were invoked in discourses about the New Woman in fin-de-siècle England, where conservatives like Eliza Lynn Linton fulminated against the social insurgency of "the wild women"' (207). The maenad became a metaphor for anxieties around the New Woman, merging 'in the male, establishment imaginary in the first decade of the new century with the deviant, educated, independent spirits who were enacting and promoting new, alternative lifestyles within their midst' (Macintosh, 'Dancing Maenads...' 193). Even so, the association could also be a desirable one: Prins points to such figures as poets Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper, who identified as modern maenads; they were influenced by Walter Pater's 'feminized and potentially feminist vision of Dionysian aestheticism' in his 1889 essay on *The Bacchae* (208). McCarthy may well have known Bradley and Cooper as a result of their mutual acquaintances Charles Ricketts and Charles Shannon, as well as Jane Harrison, another woman sometimes described in maenadic terms (Macintosh, 'Dancing Maenads...' 193). Significantly, Harrison collaborated with Murray on research that reasserted the historical facticity of maenadic cults, emphasising the role movement played in their worship of Dionysus (Prins 214).

Prins suggests that some women at the end of the nineteenth century ‘turned to the maenad to enact the mobility of “the new woman”’ (33). This may help to explain the spell of interest in *The Bacchae* from women artists around the same time as McCarthy. Actress Edith Wynne Matthison had been communicating with Murray about plans to recite sections of the play while touring the US, and dancer Maud Allan ‘caused a great stir with her wild Bacchic reels at The Palace Theatre’; Professor E. A. Sonnenschein had also been interested in the play for presentation at a meeting of the Classical Association in Birmingham (Macintosh, ‘From the Court...’ 156-157). Prins connects Allan’s Bacchic dancing with Isadora Duncan’s trip to Athens in 1903 to ‘dance like a maenad in the Theater of Dionysus,’ part of a ‘new kinesthetic emerging in the twentieth century’ embodied by modern maenads (206). Both Allan and Duncan were dancing in London in the spring and summer of 1908, with Allan’s ‘reeling Bacchante’ described as dancing straight off a Greek vase, introducing audiences ‘to uninhibited, even ecstatic, dancing that had previously either been deemed unaccountably alien or confined to scholarly discussion of ancient Dionysiac ritual’ (Macintosh, ‘Dancing Maenads...’ 195). McCarthy was no dancer, but figure 5 alludes to a kinaesthetic conception of Dionysus that might account for McCarthy’s clashes with Poel. Given her own research for the costume, McCarthy also seems to have been trying to make a vase figure come to life in a far from static way, situating herself – consciously or otherwise – in the tradition Allan had been showcasing earlier in the year.

Maenadic resonances also pervaded the ‘Court mission’ associated with Barker, McCarthy, and Shaw. In McCarthy’s memoirs, Shaw becomes a kind of Dionysus who facilitates McCarthy’s liberation through the playing of a part – and with McCarthy’s liberation comes the same for all women in the theatre, then for women outside of the theatre, from anonymous individuals through to one of the key figureheads of the women’s suffrage movement herself

(see quotation above from pages 63-64 of *Myself and My Friends*). Shaw is implicated as

Dionysus twice, in fact: as a liberator of women from the constraints of the prevailing cultural terms in which their gender is defined and as a god of theatre from whom theatrical acts have a social impact. If these are merely Dionysiac undertones, however, McCarthy also offers vivid imagery:

Then came Shaw. But although his plays were soon winning applause abroad, England long remained suspicious of the new drama and hostile to it, and no less to the new methods of production which accompanied it. The Court Theatre become the mission hall of the new drama, and all who frequented there were banded together in the determination to make its message acceptable to the theatre-going public. The General Booth of this Salvation Army of the stage was the wild young Irishman with his pocket full of plays. From the moment I joined in the adventure the tambourine of my enthusiasm waxed loud. (62)

Here McCarthy tacitly invokes Shaw's 1905 play *Major Barbara*, which was inspired by both Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* and Murray's translation of *The Bacchae*, with maenads reimagined as the Salvation Army. If Shaw saw 'the tambourines, trumpets, and drums carried by the soldiers of Christ' as 'akin to the trappings of the dancing Maenads of ancient Greece,' then so did McCarthy see a further equivalence with the theatre practice of the Court (Hall and Macintosh 500). Furthermore, the feminist underpinnings of the Court as understood by McCarthy through her role as Ann in *Man and Superman* confirms the prevailing associations between feminism and maenadism. In this way, McCarthy's 'theatrical salvation in the mission hall of the Court Theatre' can be understood as a kind of conversion in which the shift from existing models of female behaviour to those offered by the ideals of the New Woman is analogous to the Theban women leaving domestic confinement to find freedom in the Dionysiac cult (*Myself and My Friends* 63).

Nevertheless, if maenadism had feminist currency around the time of the production – and the Court was a site for such fervent support for women’s rights – then Poel seems not to have tried to capitalise on it. Murray’s text, too, does little to emphasise these resonances, although as Macintosh points out, Murray’s 1902 introduction linked ‘the ecstatic nature of the Dionysiac to the idea of political liberation,’ and his work emerged from close collaboration with Harrison (‘Dancing Maenads...’ 193; see also Macintosh, ‘From the Court to the National’). However, by concentrating on the live-text – the meanings produced in the moment of performance on those November afternoons – it is possible to imagine such resonances coming into play. Given the continuity of so many elements from the Court under Barker and Vedrenne – Shavian Euripides, the timing of the performances, the overdetermined presence of McCarthy, and the space itself – it is likely that the production attracted a similarly women-heavy, socialist, feminist audience; indeed, they may have come along having seen Allan’s Bacchic dancing earlier in the year. As such, they (or at least some of those watching) would have been well placed to read a live-text encoded with meanings that drew on contemporary understandings of maenadism and McCarthy’s politics and intertheatrical profile – as well as the politics and intertheatrical profile of the space, an additional thread of continuity from the Barker-Vedrenne seasons to Miss Lillah McCarthy’s matinées. This correlates with the range of positive comments from (mostly male) reviewers and commentators on McCarthy’s captivating performance. Shaw’s comment in a letter to Barker following the first matinée is instructive – he wrote that *The Bacchae* ‘was, on the whole, good business for Lillah: it brought out the sort of thing she can do that nobody else can do’ (‘My dear Barker’ 138). This was McCarthy’s show, playing to her strengths, and in the presentation of her body depicted in figures 3-5 she seems to be signifying as maenadic, enacting the New Woman in the guise of a cross-dressed god of theatre.

At least the very least, McCarthy may have tried to signify this way. Prins observes that Jane Harrison was arguing as early as 1894 that maenads' kinaesthetic experience of Dionysus defied the 'common sense' of the 'thoroughly British Pentheus,' giving them 'greater access to the truth' (Harrison qtd. in Prins 212). McCarthy's own maenadic, kinaesthetic approach to the role was curtailed by her own Pentheuses, Murray and Poel, whose theoretical knowledge (of Dionysus, of theatre practice) competed with McCarthy's instincts for the part. Murray wanted Dionysus to be a child; Poel wanted her to be a statue; but McCarthy appeared as a woman. It is telling that it is McCarthy's costume and hair – elements that neither writer nor director attempted to meddle with – that preserve the maenadic possibilities that might have been picked up on by the audience even if they were not as fully realised in performance as they could have been.

Perhaps the clearest evidence of the latent maenadic possibilities in the 1908 production can be found in Shaw's play *Misalliance*, which premiered two years later. McCarthy's Dionysus seemed to have had quite an impact on Shaw because it inspired the creation of Lina Szczepanowska, his most pronounced New Woman (Morgan, *The Shavian Playground* 193). Lina, an independently-minded acrobat who wears men's clothing, arrives at the end of the first act when her plane crashes into the vinery of the respectable middle-class household in Surrey that the audience has been introduced to. Her arrival subsequently subverts the social order of the house's inhabitants and guests (194). Margery Morgan thus positions *Misalliance* as, in part, Shaw's particular response to McCarthy's production of *The Bacchae*, incorporating motifs and

fragments of Euripides' tragic plot (*Bernard Shaw II* 12).<sup>34</sup> Lina is the Dionysus of *Misalliance*, with her sudden arrival equivalent to the god's advent in Thebes.

Although the part of Lina was inspired by and written for McCarthy, she was ultimately unable to play the role when *Misalliance* reached the stage (Kennedy 25). Nevertheless, it is possible to ascertain the way McCarthy's Dionysus crystallised the Shavian 'unwomanly woman' from the fact that Lina is Shaw's 'most fully developed feminist, building on all his earlier versions of the "the New Woman"' (Innes 175). This is most acutely expressed by Lina's speech in which she rejects the marriage proposals of the four men pursuing her in the wake of her arrival:

[Johnny, one of the four men] tells me I must know that my present position is not one for a nice woman. This to me, Lina Szczepanowska! I am an honest woman: I earn my living. I am a free woman: I live in my own house. I am a woman of the world: I have thousands of friends: every night crowds of people applaud me, delight in me, buy my picture, pay hard-earned money to see me. I am strong: I am skilful: I am brave: I am independent: I am unbought: I am all that a woman ought to be. (249)

At least Lina was all that Shaw thought the New Woman ought to be – and this was derived from McCarthy's Dionysus. Taken alongside Ann Whitefield (as seen in figure 1), Lina indicates that McCarthy's cross-dressed god sufficiently inspired Shaw to create a character whose rejection of the 'womanly woman' is encoded in her appearance as much as her behaviour. The play embraces the effects of the maenadic New Woman in other ways, too. Lina's arrival initiates a transformation in the character of Hypatia Tarleton, who earlier laments that she 'want[s] to be an active verb' (182). Hypatia begins a frenzied, unceasing pursuit of the man she desires;

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<sup>34</sup> Morgan's discusses the connections between *Misalliance* and *The Bacchae* in detail in *The Shavian Playground* (193-195).



Morgan thus describes her in maenadic terms (*The Shavian Playground* 194). In this way, Shaw stages an equivalent of what McCarthy described her Ann Whitefield as doing in real life: impacting women's lives by inspiring them to break free from restrictive Victorian models of gendered behaviour. If McCarthy and her chorus members were unable to fully enact a feminist kinaesthetic via the maenad in 1908, certainly they gave Shaw the idea for women to enact it (in one form or another) in *Misalliance*. It is therefore via Shaw's play that the feminist potential of the 1908 production of *The Bacchae* finds expression, making it clear that in the live-text of those two matinée performances McCarthy's Dionysus resonated with the feminist contexts of the day, regardless of Murray or Poel.

### **Performing the God of the Maenads**

*The Bacchae* was a sign of things to come for McCarthy. Not only did she eventually go on to successfully manage a number of theatres in partnership with Barker (the Little Theatre, the Kingsway, and the Savoy from 1911-1914), but she appeared in a succession of highly prominent productions of Greek drama. She played Jocasta in Max Reinhardt's *Oedipus the King* at Covent Garden in 1912 and had a string of successful performances in productions directed by Barker. These included Hecuba in *The Trojan Women* and, perhaps most famously, Iphigenia in *Iphigenia Among the Taurians*, a role she continued to play until the 1930s. Edith Hall emphasises how McCarthy's theatrical skill, feminist politics, identity as a theatre manager, and experience of playing Dionysus in 1908 combined to underpin McCarthy's career-defining turn as Iphigenia (*Adventures with Iphigenia in Tauris* 214). Hall makes it clear that the production – which after its premiere at the Kingsway Theatre in 1912 toured the US three years later, playing to stadiums of up to 15,000 people at a time – was tightly bound up in the wider

creative innovations of the time brought about by such figures as Isadora Duncan, Igor Stravinsky, and Vaslav Nijinsky.<sup>35</sup> *The Bacchae* of 1908 was thus not only a part of this same emergent avant-garde, but provided a crucial stepping stone for McCarthy's career.

Of course, McCarthy's work in the theatre is only one dimension of her presence in London in the early part of the twentieth century. Her work with both Greek drama and Shakespeare – in the latter playing an instrumental role in Barker's ground-breaking productions shortly before World War I – took place alongside avid campaigning for women's suffrage. She was Vice President and treasurer for the AFL for a time, wrote and appeared publicly in support of the cause, and even claims, in her memoirs, to have graffitied 'Votes for Women' on the Prime Minister's desk.<sup>36</sup> The intermingling of ideas and individuals in both McCarthy's stage life and her political activism is hard to meaningfully separate; as Susan Carlson has observed, Barker and McCarthy were surrounded by 'deeply committed suffragists' and what was being produced on stage was mirrored by the activism off of it (130). For Carlson, McCarthy is emblematic of Israel Zangwill's observation that 'a Suffragist will not always make an actress; but it is a cheering fact that an actress is nearly always a Suffragist' (qtd. in Carlson 130). Sophie Duncan goes further, specifying in relation to the 1914 *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, in which McCarthy played Helena, that it was McCarthy's body – signifying both in the theatre and beyond it thanks to her public profile as a suffragist – that implied 'political protest

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<sup>35</sup> See *Adventures with Iphigenia in Tauris* 241-255. For the tour to the US, see Slater, 'Touring the Ivies with Iphigenia, 1915.'

<sup>36</sup> *Myself and My Friends* 149. This extraordinary passage, in which she describes herself as feeling like 'Joan of Arc of the ballot-box,' is one of few mentions of her suffrage work in *Myself and My Friends*. As Susan Carlson points out, however, downplaying politics is 'stylistically consistent' with other autobiographies of the time; evidence from the period suggests McCarthy was prominent in suffrage activism (129).

and theatre-making semiotic equivalence' (216). Duncan describes McCarthy as 'a source and signifier of creative and political interchange on the Savoy stage' and the 'nexus of the Royal Court's Shakespearean and suffragist network' (216, 218). Although *The Bacchae* was not Shakespeare, and came before Barker and McCarthy's famous seasons at the Savoy, there is no reason to suggest that the 1908 production existed outside of McCarthy's feminist network or resisted political signification. In fact, quite the opposite seems to be the case, with the production emerging not just as part of the zeitgeist but as a direct continuation of McCarthy's political and career aspirations that were facilitated by the rise of first wave feminism. Furthermore, in Shaw's creation of Lina and *Misalliance* as a direct result of the production, it ultimately contributed to the zeitgeist.

Given the intersections of theatre-making, suffrage politics, and the wider art scene of pre-war Europe that Carlson, Duncan, and Hall variously identify in McCarthy and Barker's work only a few years after *The Bacchae*, it is important to acknowledge the production's position as a threshold to this future enterprise. As such, the narrative that the production was a failure is particularly reductive. It overlooks the fact that the 'failure' can largely be put down to the squabble between Murray and Poel, and that taking this negative view as axiomatic misleadingly assumes these men's perspectives as given. Accepting Murray's unmediated point of view also leads to the misconception that he was the production's driving force when, in fact, it was McCarthy who pursued it from idea to reality – and when Murray was actually the one responsible for curtailing the project's future. Correcting this by offering a fresh account of the production is reason enough to return to it. Nevertheless, there are important implications raised by the production for the subsequent performance history of *The Bacchae*.

In Jacky Bratton's discussion of the actress in drag, she quotes Judith Butler's formulation of the practice as a 'monstrous ascent to phallicism,' a challenge to the hierarchy of the male (Bratton 235; Butler 103). It is tempting to see McCarthy as Dionysus in this light – especially given the phallic symbolism of the thyrsus. To the extent that McCarthy was inventing a classical male role for her own, performing Dionysus into the context of maenadism, feminism, and the New Woman, then she does present a challenge to established hierarchies – but of the play's performance history rather than of her own moment. McCarthy performed Dionysus on stage as a maenad and as a New Woman long before he was reinvented as a libidinous male of the long 1970s. Reasserting the significance of the 1908 production acknowledges that women – and not just McCarthy – played a crucial role in bringing *The Bacchae* to the stage some sixty years before the productions that Fischer-Lichte and others situate as the play's renaissance. It challenges the assuredness of post-1960s readings that depend on Dionysus being both male and highly sexualised, and the priority given to performance receptions that attend to such readings. It also minimises the significance of men to the play altogether, given that Pentheus – played by a young Esme Percy – seems to have interested very few working on or responding to the production. The filtering of *The Bacchae* into *Misalliance* is again telling – while there is a very clear Dionysus figure, there is no clear Pentheus. Morgan detects a Pentheus in the character of Gunner/Julius Baker, particularly in his spying on the antics of the Tarleton household from an inexplicable Turkish bath (*The Shavian Playground* 194), but certainly the Dionysus-Pentheus rivalry does not dominate in the same way.<sup>37</sup> In uncoupling Dionysus from maleness and embodying the god as female, and in

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<sup>37</sup> Intriguingly, Percy came to direct and star in a well-received revival of *Misalliance* at the Royal Court in 1930 – playing Gunner/Baker (there are some materials from this revival, including a programme note from Shaw, held at the V&A Theatre and Performance archive).

decentring men more widely from the play's overall meaning, the recovery of this production offers the possibility of investigating *The Bacchae* in new ways, of understanding Dionysus and the resonances of his cult differently, and of reasserting the crucial stake women have in the play.

Even if the 1908 production did not explicitly espouse a feminist politics, it remains significant. Recalling Dionysus as embodied by McCarthy, alongside others who were collectively resisting the patriarchal status quo at the time in their off-stage lives, opens up questions about modern resonances of the maenad and the role of the maenadic in the play. In short, giving serious consideration to this production, situating it as significant in the performance history of *The Bacchae*, starts to write women back into that history and back into the play. In beginning to unpick existing scholarship's narrative of how the play has been performed, it alters current understanding of how *The Bacchae* might be engaged with and what possibilities it holds for theatre-makers. The maenad – and Dionysus as god of maenads – comes to the fore, and the intertwining of the maenadic with the feminist praxis of those women engaging with *The Bacchae* emerges as a theme in work later in the twentieth century. This theme runs through the next few chapters of this study, unfolding in new ways in each new generation.



## CHAPTER 2 Maenadic Sisterhood, Maenadic Violence

For one reason or another, after 1908 interest in *The Bacchae* waned. The APGRD database identifies a reading at Radley College in 1916, while the V&A Theatre and Performance archive holds the programme and two reviews for a one-woman rendition of Murray's translation by Dorothea Spinney in 1929. The productions that follow in the 1930s and 1950s mostly took place in academic contexts in the original language.<sup>38</sup> While Fischer-Lichte suggests this lack of professional presence on the British stage was the result of the 1908 production's failure, there are other factors at work (*Dionysus Resurrected* 52). The social and cultural conditions of British theatre were, along with most aspects of British life, radically interrupted by the two World Wars. Some of the factors that brought McCarthy's *Dionysus* to the stage changed: the maenad lost her resonance as a symbol of female subversion and, after universal suffrage was achieved in 1928, feminist activism no longer cohered around agitation for the vote.<sup>39</sup> While *Misalliance* was – as with many of Shaw's plays – frequently revived, it was increasingly perceived as a period piece. Shaw himself commented on the play's many 'anachronisms' in a programme note to the 1930 production at the Royal Court, including the idea that Lina's appearance in men's clothing

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<sup>38</sup> For example, at UCL in 1921, Cambridge in 1930 and 1956, Newbury Grammar School in 1919 and 1924, Radley College again in 1945, and Oxford in 1950.

<sup>39</sup> Macintosh discusses the 'process of radical domestication' that occurred in the figure of the dancing maenad after World War II, 'with the result that there was ultimately very little recognizably "Bacchic" about the post-war maenads' performances' ('Dancing Maenads...' 192). For the changes in feminism after World War II, see Banks (207-224).

was once controversial ('Author's Note').<sup>40</sup> Times had changed, and *The Bacchae* appeared not to appeal to the new generations of theatre-makers in post-war Britain.

The 1960s and 1970s brought further widespread socio-cultural change, and one of the (perhaps unexpected) outcomes was the revival of interest in Greek drama on both sides of the Atlantic.<sup>41</sup> *The Bacchae* was at the forefront of this renaissance. In *Dionysus Resurrected*, which as I have discussed positions *Dionysus in 69* as the re-birth of *The Bacchae* on stage, Fischer-Lichte paints a picture of the long 1970s as a period of revolution and upheaval that proved extremely fertile for the play, a global 'time of transition and transformation, a time of politically motivated violence – a time of crisis.' She cites the Vietnam War and protests against it, the Civil Rights Movement and associated demonstrating and rioting, student rebellions in Europe, and violence in Northern Ireland (5-6). Fischer-Lichte does not, however, mention the emergence of second wave feminism.<sup>42</sup> As with the first wave and the 1908 production, *The Bacchae* did not achieve its renewed popularity from the 1960s onwards until feminism was once more a significant socio-cultural presence.

While a number of developments after the era of first wave feminism contributed to the emergence of the second wave, including the publication of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* in 1949, it was not until the 1960s that the movement began on a wide scale in both the US

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<sup>40</sup> The V&A Theatre and Performance archive holds materials for professional revivals of *Misalliance* in 1922, 1930, 1933, 1943, 1956, 1965, and 1973. It is worth noting that the latter production, at the Mermaid Theatre in London, is the first to mention the connection between *Misalliance* and the 1908 production of *The Bacchae* in its programme – by 1973 *The Bacchae* once again had currency for audiences (Programme for Mermaid Theatre *Misalliance*).

<sup>41</sup> See Edith Hall's introduction to the landmark edited volume *Dionysus Since 69*, which is paradigmatic of the commonly held view amongst classical reception scholars that Greek drama was re-popularised from the 1960s onwards ('Introduction: Why Greek Tragedy...').

<sup>42</sup> Martha Lear coined the term 'second wave' in 1968 in an essay that also cast the era of the women's suffrage movement and the New Woman as the 'first wave' ('The Second Feminist Wave').



and the UK. For the US, the 1963 publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* is often cited as a watershed in the growing momentum of the second wave, though it was as much a product of the changing mood as an instigator (Banks 211). In the UK this was mirrored by similarly landmark publications, including Sheila Rowbotham's pamphlet *Women's Liberation and the New Politics* (1969) and Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1970). There were major legislative changes: in the UK, the Abortion Act of 1967, the Divorce Reform Act of 1969, and the Equal Pay Act of 1970 (the US Equal Pay Act was passed in 1963). Helene Keyssar traces the beginnings of feminist theatre as a practice to this period, situating it amidst the theatricality of protests by women's groups (*Feminist Theatre* 18). Images of women collectively resisting patriarchal authority were pervasive across Anglo-American culture well into the 1980s, and as with the women's suffrage movement, feminism was often perceived as endorsing violence. This was in part a result of a few sensationalised cases that 'proved' that feminists were only out to spill men's blood. Radical feminist Valerie Solanas' 1967 *SCUM Manifesto* is an infamous example; Solanas and her manifesto reached mainstream attention when she attempted to kill Andy Warhol the following year. This association between women, feminism, and violence continued to frame feminist demonstrations in the 1980s, as the media coverage surrounding the extended protests of the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp demonstrated. But even though the media reaction often characterised the Greenham women – who continued the second wave tactic of utilising the theatricality of demonstration – as threatening the home and endangering children, the creation of the women-only camp was based on an essentialist polarisation of women as peaceful and men as violent.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Tim Cresswell dissects the media reaction to the Greenham Common peace women in his chapter on the camp in *In Place / Out of Place* (97-145). See also Margaret L. Laware, 'Circling the Missiles...' and Julia Emberley and Donna Landry, 'Coverage of Greenham....'

It is against this backdrop of protesting and dissenting women that the performance receptions of *The Bacchae* I discuss in this chapter emerged. If the *SCUM Manifesto* to Greenham Common seems a highly selective sample of the second wave feminist movement, it is because they stand out as two flashpoints in discussions amongst feminists in the 1960s and 1980s that informed the projects I focus on here. These are Maureen Duffy's *Rites*, a British contemporary of *Dionysus in 69* and an early example of feminist playwriting in this period, and *A Mouthful of Birds*, which appeared seventeen years later in 1986, after nearly two decades of feminist theatre practice, with a text by Caryl Churchill and David Lan. The themes of violence and collective resistance – familiar motifs in discourse around the second wave movement – run through both these projects, as does the equally familiar theme of sisterhood. For both *Rites* and *A Mouthful of Birds*, *The Bacchae* played a crucial role in facilitating discussion of these themes, with the creatives at work drawing in complex ways on Euripides' play to speak to issues pertinent to their own historical moment. As such, this chapter looks closely at how *The Bacchae* resonated with certain second wave feminist theatre-makers and was used by them to expose fault lines in the movement that would have increasing prominence in the 1990s. Moreover, in discussing *Rites* and *A Mouthful of Birds* as part of this study, I wish to reassert their place in the performance history of Euripides' play. One reason they are not always included is because of their status as adaptations – so considering why both Duffy and the collective creators of *A Mouthful of Birds* turned to adaptation as a form for their projects is my first point of discussion.

## The Politics of Adaptation in the Second Wave

When *A Mouthful of Birds* was first performed in 1986, it was coincident with a nascent body of scholarship that had begun to account for and assert the significance of two decades of feminist theatre. Publications such as Michelene Wandor's *Understudies: Theatre and Sexual Politics* (1981) and *Look Back in Gender* (1987), Helene Keyssar's *Feminist Theatre: An Introduction to Plays of Contemporary British and American Women* (1984), and Sue-Ellen Case's *Feminism and Theatre* (1988) took stock of the plays and theatrical projects produced by women in the preceding decades, situating them as part of wider theatre histories.<sup>44</sup> Other publications such as Jill Dolan's *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (1988) and Lynda Hart's edited collection *Making a Spectacle: Feminist Essays on Contemporary Women's Theatre* (1989) proposed feminist ways of reading theatre and of analysing feminist theatre-making strategies. Caryl Churchill's work is frequently discussed across these texts, and her involvement in such an experimental piece of theatre as *A Mouthful of Birds* made the project a timely case study for key issues being explored by feminist theatre scholars. Perhaps the most notable publications in this regard are Elin Diamond's '(In)Visible Bodies in Churchill's Theatre' (originally published in *Theatre Journal* in 1988 and reprinted in Hart's collection the following year) and Janelle Reinelt's 'Feminist Theory and the Problem of Performance' (*Modern Drama*, 1989). *Rites*, too, appears in this literature, often situated as a landmark in the development of feminist theatre, partly because of its early appearance in the history of second wave feminist playwriting in the UK and partly because of the bold statements Duffy made with the play.<sup>45</sup> I emphasise the place both *Rites* and

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<sup>44</sup> Wandor, a pioneer within this body of literature, revised and expanded *Understudies* as *Carry On, Understudies* (1986) and *Look Back in Gender* as *Post-War British Drama: Looking Back in Gender* in 2001. She also edited the first four volumes of *Plays by Women* (1982-1985), in which *Rites* was published.

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, Wandor (159-162) and Keyssar (*Feminist Theatre* 117-119).

*A Mouthful of Birds* had – and have – in feminist theatre scholarship so as to underline their significance in this context as well as problematise their relative absence in scholarship on *The Bacchae*.

So why is this the case? Why have two projects lauded in the context of feminist theatre been largely marginalised by those working on *The Bacchae*? The answer is implied in Sophie Mills' framing of *Rites* as a 'hangover' rather than a part of the play's performance history proper (118). By virtue of their status as adaptations projects such as *Rites* and *A Mouthful of Birds* disassociate themselves from Euripides' text and appear, superficially, to be less relevant to the play's performance history than productions of the text itself. As scholarship on adaptations such as Soyinka's *The Bacchae of Euripides* has amply demonstrated, this is not the case: adaptations are often opportunities to explore complex instances of engagement with ancient drama.<sup>46</sup> There is something more going on with these feminist adaptations that further distances them from Euripides, and from their easy incorporation into existing performance histories, that enables them to be labelled as 'hangovers.' This is closely bound up with the way feminist theatre – and feminist theatre scholarship – approached canonical drama in the period of the second wave.

The first chapter in Case's landmark *Feminism and Theatre*, titled 'Traditional History: A Feminist Deconstruction,' begins with a revised version of her 1985 essay 'Classic Drag.' This challenged the value of female characters in Greek drama to contemporary feminist theatre-makers, situating Greek drama as purveying a patriarchally-constructed 'Woman' that

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<sup>46</sup> For Soyinka's engagement with *The Bacchae*, see (for example) Macintosh, 'From the Court to the National,' Hardwick, 'Greek Drama and Anti-Colonialism,' and McConnell, 'Postcolonial Sparagmos.' Adam Lecznar's entire doctoral thesis is focused on Soyinka's adaptation.

suppresses 'the experiences, stories, feelings, and fantasies of actual women' ('Classic Drag' 318).

In its focus on the *Oresteia*, it is prefigured by Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1969) and Simone de Beauvoir's aside that *The Eumenides* stages the triumph of the 'patriarchate over the matriarchate' (111 n. 9). This thread of scholarship demonstrated a method of identifying and resisting misogynistic images of women in the canon (Case, 'Classic Drag' 317). As a result, Case argues that the plays of ancient Athens are unimportant to the feminist theatre-maker (327).

This argument extends to Aristotle's ideas about tragedy in his *Poetics*, rejecting the gender-inflected rationale behind Aristotelian dramaturgy:

Once more, women are invisible - there are no qualities ascribed to them [by Aristotle], and their invisibility provides the empty space which organises the focus on the male subject. In this way, they are subjects of tragic action only in so far as they might help to define the male character. (326)

Although Case does not mention *The Bacchae*, this perspective correlates with the prevailing understanding of the play at the time she was writing in the mid-1980s – a text about (male, sexualised) Dionysus and his rivalry with Pentheus, in which Agave and the maenads have a secondary role and are, in any case, framed as thralls to the god. As such, this wholesale rejection of not only Greek drama but the Aristotelian form altogether may explain why feminist theatre-makers in this period were not engaging with Euripides' play as text.

Despite Case's argument that Greek drama is not relevant to feminist theatre-makers, there were women and men who identified as feminist paying attention to it in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s (as the case studies in this chapter indicate). These individuals utilised adaptation, which became a strategy for responding to the problems Case identifies. Duffy and Churchill are not alone in using adaptation in their work: other prominent women writers engaging with

adaptation in or shortly after the second wave period include Pam Gems, Timberlake Wertenbaker, and Sarah Daniels. Critical discussions of these playwrights' work employ a range of different terms to describe the feminist adaptation process, but perhaps the most prominent – particularly in relation to second wave feminism – is 're-visioning.' First proposed by feminist poet Adrienne Rich in 1971, it is 'the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction' (369). Re-visioning is, in Rich's conception, a vital act that enables women to recover their place in the cultural landscape by looking at patriarchally-created images through fresh, feminist eyes: 'we need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us' (ibid.). Adaptation thus became a means of challenging, expanding, and re-working images of women in the canon, including Greek drama, often expanding the corpus of women-written drama in the process of contesting the legacy of (long dead) male playwrights.

Both *Rites* and *A Mouthful of Birds* have been discussed in terms of 're-visioning.'<sup>47</sup> But even if they are paradigmatic examples of 'entering an old text from a new critical direction,' they have inspired other metaphors that aim to pinpoint something of the feminist politics underpinning their acts of adaptation. Katharine Worth proposes the notion of 'earthing,' for example (4). 'Earthiness has been seen as a distinguishing aspect of women's imagination by Pam Gems,' Worth notes, with Gems quoted as saying that women are 'very coarse, funny, subversive' and that these all make good qualities for drama (qtd. in Worth 4). Women playwrights' adaptations thus become explorations 'in deglamourizing or earthing in modern soil the more romantic images of women long prominent in the European consciousness' (4).

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<sup>47</sup> See Hersh, "How Sweet the Kill" and Babbage, *Re-visioning Myth*. Babbage's chapter 'Out of Character' (93-138) discusses *Rites* and *A Mouthful of Birds* alongside Wertenbaker's *The Love of the Nightingale*, which adapts the myth of Philomele and Procne and culminates in Bacchic rites.

This idea is appropriate for adaptations of a play as filled with earth-imagery as *The Bacchae*, particularly given the depiction of the earth of Mount Cithaeron as a site for women's freedom from patriarchal authority. Gems' assertion of women as coarse, funny, and subversive also provides a useful characterisation of both Duffy's and Churchill and Lan's approaches to their texts. Perhaps most helpfully, earthing emphasises the relocation of a narrative in a new space and a new time that provides distance from the source text but also an environment in which to understand it in new ways. This applies to both *Rites* and *A Mouthful of Birds*.

Helene Keyssar offers a further metaphor for the relationship between *The Bacchae* and *A Mouthful of Birds* that applies to *Rites* and pinpoints the crucial role gender has in shaping the politics of feminist adaptation. This is adaptation as 'doing dangerous history' ('Doing Dangerous History' 135). For Keyssar, this approach characterises much of Churchill's career, a way of writing history so as to 'reveal itself to be a history of women and men' – calling into question dominant concepts of gender and class in a given historical moment and their connectedness to the present (135, 136). What makes this dangerous is the possibility that, far from affirming the stability and naturalness of present socio-cultural concepts underpinning gender, these histories warn against being complacent about such concepts, reasserting the fact that transforming them requires changes in culture and consciousness (136, 139). Thinking through feminist adaptation of historical texts as doing dangerous history helps focus attention towards the way feminist writers not only re-work words, characters, and narratives – in other words, 'shaping plays' in the conventional sense of a playwright – but decode ideologically loaded social, cultural, and historical values in order to expose their relationship to the present. That is to say, feminist adaptation does not challenge the canon for the sake of it, but does so in order to speak powerfully to the present. It can thus function as a political act.

The fact that both Worth and Keyssar theorise around *Rites* and *A Mouthful of Birds* in their thinking about what feminist theatre does with adaptation is significant. These pieces' engagement with *The Bacchae* through adaptation is what makes them important additions to the performance history of the play. Their act of distancing from Euripides challenges the authority of the original text, and acknowledging these adaptations allows for their engagement with *The Bacchae* to be unpacked, which is especially important given that they are doing different things precisely *because* they have de-centred the original text. But *Rites* and *A Mouthful of Birds* also offer something to the other side of the equation: the way they engage with *The Bacchae* speaks to the feminist politics and context from which they emerged. Both identify and respond to Euripides' images of women working collectively to resist dominant, patriarchal authority (Babbage 97). In doing so, they consider how these images intersect with cultural conceptions of space and the body, and the way these conceptions impact and are impacted upon by violence. They pose questions that reflect on feminism itself, drawing attention to its limits and possibilities even as they do the same for gender. *Rites* and *A Mouthful of Birds* pursue their ideas through different forms and as a result of different theatrical practices, and in tracing differences as well as similarities, I demonstrate how their politicised readings of *The Bacchae* cohere around the figure of the maenad rather than Dionysus or Pentheus.

### **'No place to call our own': *Rites* (1968)**

One of the first explicitly feminist dramas in the UK, *Rites* was written in 1968 as a commission from the National Theatre of Great Britain (Keyssar, *Feminist Theatre* 117). It was first performed at the Jeanetta Cochrane Theatre amongst a number of other women-authored and



women-centric short new plays for an evening dubbed 'Ladies' Night.' It later transferred to the Old Vic in a double bill with John Spurling's *MacRune's Guevara* (Duffy, *Rites* 26). The architect of the Ladies' Night project was Joan Plowright, wife of the National's artistic director Laurence Olivier (Duffy, interview; Plowright 157, 158). Plowright directed *Rites* and championed it as an opportunity to provide women with greater stage opportunities (Duffy, *Rites* 26; interview). The play features a cast of twelve women and was, in Duffy's words, 'very outspoken' for the late 1960s: Duffy maintains that at one point a board meeting had to be called to decide whether Geraldine McEwan's Ada could say 'screw me' on the stage of the National Theatre. With Plowright's support, it was allowed (Duffy, *Rites* 26; interview).

This anecdote may be apocryphal, but it is fitting for Duffy, who has throughout her career as a novelist, poet, playwright, and activist consistently been 'very outspoken.' She is notable as the first high profile British woman to be open about being gay and has a long record of campaigning for gay rights.<sup>48</sup> Her 1966 novel *The Microcosm* focused on a lesbian nightclub in London, and is striking for the groundbreaking plurality of its vision of lesbian life in the UK, the intention being to show that 'there are dozens of ways of being queer' (Duffy, *The Microcosm* 273). This emphasis on the multiplicity of gay women's experience is important context for *Rites*, which unpicks the monolithic 'maenad' in its depiction of different kinds of women coming together in Duffy's Cithaeron-equivalent. It also underlines Duffy's identity as a feminist, whose work consistently pays close attention to women's lives and interiority, and who has also sought to refocus attention on overlooked women from the past – her 1977 literary biography of Aphra Behn, *The Passionate Shepherdess*, helped to bring Behn's work back to

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<sup>48</sup> See interviews with Hennegan and Gardiner.

widespread attention. When approaching *Rites*, therefore, it is important to remember that Duffy is not only interested in recovering women from the past but that her feminism is invariably marked by its intersection with her sexuality.

Both before and after *Rites*, Duffy has worked primarily as a novelist. In her work for the stage she has repeatedly turned to the classical world for inspiration, especially in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Alongside *Rites*, her plays *Solo*, *Olde Tyme*, and *Washouse* are all from this period and utilise Greek myth. These plays are also all set in a recognisably modern world, drawing on their respective myths' narrative but – to use Worth's phrase – 'earthing' them in the twentieth century. *Rites* is set in a women's public toilet in London, the play's analogue for Mount Cithaeron. This is the crux of the adaptation and is indicative of its feminist politics: whereas in Duffy's assessment *The Bacchae* is Pentheus' play, *Rites* is firmly Agave's story (Duffy, *Rites* 27). Here Agave is reimagined as Ada, the manager of the toilet facilities, where she is supported by her comically sycophantic second-in-command, Meg. As the play goes on, a number of women gather from a variety of different backgrounds – an elderly woman, three 'office girls,' two widows, and two women with a male child. Upon discovering that a girl in one stall has attempted to kill herself over a man, Ada leads the women in a frenzy of dancing and chanting. When a masculine figure emerges from another stall, the women set upon him in the belief he is a man come to spy on them. Only after they beat the figure to death do they realise that she was, in fact, a woman. The play ends with the disposal of the body in a monstrous incinerator and the return to ordinary life for all involved.

There is nothing ancient Greek about the women and their lives, and Dionysus' presence in the play is far from obvious (he is patently not divine). Such distance from the particulars of Euripides' play divorces *Rites* from much of the critical attention that has been

paid to *The Bacchae* that focuses on Pentheus, Dionysus, and the religious dimensions of the Bacchic cult. It is perhaps understandable, therefore, that *Rites*' relationship to *The Bacchae* is rarely given more than cursory attention. On one level the two plays are fundamentally different, connected only by Duffy's explicit assertion that Euripides was her inspiration. But the ways that Duffy engages with *The Bacchae* – what she draws out of it, the reading of the original it presents, and what the production subsequently signified in its live-text – are hugely significant for this study. In reorienting Euripides' narrative around the maenads, *Rites* proposes that, rather than divine madness, the gender-inflected tensions underlying the occupation of the Theban women on Cithaeron are responsible for the violence against Pentheus. As I shall explore, Duffy goes further with this in her reimagining of Pentheus as a masculine woman, but first it is important to dwell in a little more detail on Duffy's Cithaeron.

Mount Cithaeron is never seen in *The Bacchae*, operating as a space that the on-stage discussion populates with images of the errant Theban women; the audience was thus free to imagine these women as real, unimpeded by the theatrical convention of male-only performers. In *Rites*, Euripides' spatial arrangements are reversed: the action takes place in this secret world, and the on-stage discussion populates the world beyond with images of antagonistic men. Hanna Scolnicov, writing in the early 1990s, describes Duffy's setting as 'the last wholly female space in our culture ... the whole action revolves around the notion of the sacrosanct female space which no man should dare enter' (155). The sanctity of the space is heightened by the rituals, both quotidian and unusual, it facilitates: Ada's 'daily ritual' of putting on makeup (Duffy, *Rites*13), Meg's strict cleaning regimen, the secluded breakfast of the elderly woman, Nellie and Dot's hat-swapping, and the collective ritual of ascertaining the sex of the androgynous child. Scolnicov suggests that the toilet space is significant because 'only there can

the women share their thoughts and misgivings about men and develop their class consciousness' (155). Even this is a ritual process – as Keyssar argues, there is a 'ritualised ambience to the conversation' (*Feminist Theatre* 118). With Ada as the overseeing 'priestess' (Worth, 'Images of Women...' 4-5), the toilets are affirmed as a site of altered kinship relations, which sees the rejection of patriarchal definitions of kinship as determined by marriage or sexual partnership, and reformed solely on the basis of shared gender identity.

This sacred, ritualised space excludes men of any kind – and its sanctity is dependent on this exclusion. As Michelene Wandor writes, 'the maternal roles which Ada and Meg fulfil is a substitute for any other kind of family, which, given their attitude to men, is clearly impossible' (161). Just as the domestic space of the house is the site for traditional kinship relations, the women-only toilets of *Rites* become the site for a notion of exclusive 'sisterhood' that precludes the presence of men and which recalls the maenadic sisterhood of the women in *The Bacchae*, defined by their women-only worship of Dionysus. Judith Butler's recent thinking on kinship in *The Bacchae* is pertinent here. In her 2017 lecture, 'Kinship Trouble in *The Bacchae*,' Butler draws attention to the point one becomes kin to another, or one recognises someone else as kin. Sometimes, she argues, it is only possible to recognise kinship through a breach in the relationship – and this is what Butler suggests occurs in Euripides' play. Dionysus' arrival in Thebes confuses traditional familial notions of kinship, rupturing in particular the interior domestic space of the house as a container for those kinship bonds (which Butler defines as a social structure that regulates rage and desire). As a result, distinctions are lost – first of gender, then of humanity. Agave only comes to recognise Pentheus as kin in the moment she realises she has destroyed that mother-child bond. This illustrates Butler's principle that 'the breakability is the bond.' The scene of mourning at the end of *The Bacchae* suggests that kinship

is important in regulating who is or is not acceptable as a victim of violence. Butler goes on to propose that if violence is only unacceptable against someone that is kin, then perhaps the definition of who constitutes kin should be expanded in order to reduce violence.

Butler's theorisations are helpful for thinking through *Rites*' engagement with *The Bacchae*. The kinship generated and bounded by the site of the women's toilets is constantly threatened by the possibility of rupture – in this instance, by men, whose gender would violate the strict terms of the site's kinship order. Thus the 'question of guarding [the space's] perimeters against male trespassers [is made into] the very subject-matter of [Duffy's] play' (Scolnicov 156). Consequently, the play becomes invested in questions about what constitutes a male trespasser. The arrival of the male child demonstrates this. Ada and Meg both question the legitimacy of the boy's presence in the space – 'Isn't he a little old to be still coming down here?', 'It's time he stuck to his own side of the fence,' 'He's too big to be brought in here' (Duffy, *Rites* 20). It is only after inspecting the boy and identifying him as male but young enough to be under maternal guardianship that the women leave the child alone. Frances Babbage reads Ada's line to the boy ('It'd be so easy, and then nobody'd know the difference,' 21) as a threat of castration (107); it is perhaps because the boy is so easily under the women's power that he is ultimately tolerated.

The boy – Duffy's Dionysus ('Rites' 27) – signals a breach in the spatially defined kinship relations of the toilets, admitted not by his sex but by virtue of his mother. Immediately after his arrival come a series of further breaches, the first of which is the discovery of the suicidal girl, her wrists cut, in stall number two. When the cause of her distress is revealed to be a man, Ada uses it to shut down calls for a man to be summoned to rescue the girl: 'Another bleeding man! ... Bastard men! Get a man, she says. I'll get him right when I want him' (23).

This initiates the rising frenzy that responds to the subsequent two breaches: firstly, the appearance of the elderly woman and then the figure taken to be a man. Ada and the other women's rush to defend the sanctity of their space and of their attendant kinship relations demonstrates the limits of these relations. As Babbage writes, 'this sisterhood cannot tolerate those they perceive as "other"' (108). Babbage suggests that 'the old woman represents a threat [to the women] because she *is* one of themselves' (108, emphasis original); this is part of Duffy's demand to confront the 'distortions of vision' that occur with such partisan rage (Keyssar, *Feminist Theatre* 119). The woman *is* different from the others because of her age – so as the space's sanctity is ruptured, the limits of these altered kinship relations are exposed. At the same time, these relations are affirmed: both the old woman and the masculine figure are found to be women. Ultimately this women-only space and the sisterhood it offers serves to expose normative ideas about who is and is not a woman and who can or cannot be admitted into the sisterhood. The accompanying violence is thus self-directed by the women against themselves.

At the beginning of the play, Duffy's stage directions frame the space as being literally built by men. The dumbshow prologue by male workers in white overalls ritually constructing every element of what is seen on stage has frequently been interpreted by critics as indexing the patriarchal 'allowance' of this women-only space. The sequence shows that instead of the toilets being 'an uninscribed space within which women may truly be free,' they are a space that 'is not outside of the patriarchal system of representation but rather is situated within it' (Hersh 419).<sup>49</sup> Far from being a utopia, it becomes an 'oppressive, quarantined space which limits rather than liberates' (419). The space separated off for women only comes, in the end, to harm women. In this sense, then, the spatial arrangements in *Rites* reveal the way in which this myth of violent

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<sup>49</sup> See also Babbage (105), Wandor (*Post-War British Drama* 160), and Winkler (221-222).

women in their own exclusive community may serve to reinscribe their oppression. Moreover, it exposes the ideology of essentialism and difference that underpins the myth, disavowing the political efficacy of strict gender separatism as espoused by both feminist and non-feminist positions in the 1960s and provoking a reassessment of universalising notions of a 'sisterhood.'

As the action in *Rites* depends on a space defined as women-only and turns on the discovery that a 'male' victim is a woman, Hersh argues that the play 'affirms biological essentialism as the primary factor in gender determinacy, emphasizing the materiality of gender as it manifests itself within the body' (419). While there is some evidence in the play that might support Hersh's case, there is greater nuance to Duffy's representation of gender. The play is ahead of its time in challenging the underlying biases in the use of 'woman' as a universal term. Moreover, Duffy's play gestures, in performance terms, to the ways in which gender is a discursive rather than material phenomenon, as well as how the biological body is 'contoured' (to borrow from Butler's famous phrase in *Bodies That Matter*) by culturally derived notions of sex. In fact, the eponymous 'rites' of the title, facilitated by the sacred space, shape gender and sex. The climax subsequently demonstrates the dangerous limits of these gender and sex rites while pointing to their constructedness. Babbage, extending Jane Ussher's idea of 'being girl,' suggests that Ada 'does girl' (105). Ada's ritualised application of make-up is a literal performance of her 'self-construction,' a citation of an 'idealised feminine' that becomes 'a strategy of resistance' (105). Ada may be self-consciously 'playing' her gender, but the others also all enact the gender 'woman' or 'girl' through its evocation in their discussion. In other words, by drawing attention to gender as generated in discourse, and enacting this on stage, the play demonstrates the constructedness of gendered identity in terms similar to those Butler (and others) would theorise two decades after *Rites* premiered. This is facilitated by adapting

Euripides' own innovation of the myth of Dionysus' return to Thebes: Pentheus' gender-disguise and its disastrous consequences.

The gender categories that are evoked in the play are underpinned by hostility. Each of the characters come to define their identity in an uneasy or openly antagonistic relationship to men. These men vary from sexual partners (Ada, Meg, the office girls, the suicidal girl), to employers (the office girls, especially Norma), children (the two women with the doll), and 'stranger' husbands (Nellie and Dot). For Ada, whose sexual liaisons are the subject of discussions that bookend the play, men are customers and her encounters with them little more than capitalistic exchanges. Responding to a financial world she identifies as masculine, Ada seeks to 'know [her] market': '...you've got to tart it up a bit to sell it high ... You've got to make them pay for the wrapping off' (Duffy, *Rites* 14). Later this idea of buying and selling is directly implicated in gendered power relations. In response to the girl's attempted suicide, Ada launches into an angry speech:

Get a man, she says. I'll get him right where I want him. He thinks because I'm flat on my back he's got me but I've got him; caught, clenched as if I had my teeth in him. 'Come in,' I say all soft and I squeeze him tight, loving as a boa constrictor. And they're wild for it. They swoon and cry and die in my arms and come back for more. 'Screw me,' I whisper and they pound and pant in their pitiful climaxes they think so earth shaking. 'That was a good one,' they say and then I make them pay for it. (23)

Ada's understanding of her self-identity is based on a perceived ability to provide experiences of ecstatic pleasure that transcend distinctions between human and animal, life and death – an appropriation of the language of prostitution in which men are at once Ada's clients, prey, and murder victims. This establishes a distinct sense of 'man' in relation to Ada's 'woman' – and it is a relationship characterised by violence.



Ada's essentialist understanding of men, women, and the violence between them may be the play's most extreme evocation of gender. Nevertheless, Norma and the office girls also define themselves by their sexual and economic relationships to men. In their conversation, men are constructed as obscene, sexually motivated voyeurs – after reeling off a list of sex-related paraphernalia, including dirty postcards, blue films, and French models, they collectively declare 'only men, only men, only men do that' (Duffy, *Rites* 15). Yet they reject Ada's calculating approach to relationships – after Ada mocks her, Norma remarks that the Ada has 'no romance' and that her approach is 'nasty' and 'mercenary' (16). The extent to which Norma believes this is thrown into doubt later when she suggests her boyfriend Eddy is akin to a child under her care:

SECOND WOMAN: All men are babies.

NORMA: You should see my Eddy, gambols around like a kid;  
bounces up the road till I'm ashamed of him, and then he cries.

...

FIRST OFFICE GIRL: What did you do?

NORMA: Kissed it and made it better. What do you think? (20)

The way in which Norma suggests she exerts a special power over Eddy – to make him cry and then make him feel better again – aligns her with Ada's own conception of gender relations. Furthermore, how Norma and her colleagues discuss their subversive office tactics – taking impromptu days off and bonding with one another while the male boss is out of the room – suggests another way in which the women define themselves in opposition to a male-associated economic environment.

In contrast to the younger women, Nellie, Dot, and Meg all define themselves against an absence of men or lack of male attention. Meg's persistent questions about Ada's sex life suggests a vicarious pleasure in hearing about the sexual liaisons Meg tells us she has barely

experienced personally. The male attention she desires, however, may be that of her son. Early in the play, she is knitting something that Ada suggests is permanently unfinished; Meg indicates it is a gift for someone male. Then, later, when one of the women remarks that it is 'a pity [children] have to grow up,' Meg says 'I was better off without them,' implying an estranged relationship with one or more sons (Duffy, *Rites* 23). The suggestion here is that, in the absence of sexual and familial attention from men, Meg is lonely. The same can be said for Nellie and Dot. Their contributions to the discussion tend to focus on their now dead husbands, men they doted on in life in a manner the younger women seem to view as akin to servitude. Like Meg, both older women seem to have largely absent children. Dot says that her and Nellie are 'both alone now' (18). Though the pair seem to spend a lot of time together, going on day trips and playing bingo, this does not seem to define them as much as their palpable sense of the absent men in their lives. Even when Ada observes that the pair are 'better off without [their husbands],' they remark, in unison, 'what a terrible thing to say' (ibid.). Furthermore, Duffy points to how Nellie and Dot's sense of absence, and the loneliness resulting from that, may have in fact preceded the death of their husbands. Nellie admits: 'I never saw [her husband] undressed in thirty-six years until they came to lay him out'; this recalls her earlier statement: 'You get used to being alone. Thirty-six years I waited all day for him to come home in the evening except for popping out for a bit of shopping or when you came, Dot' (21, 18). For these women, their lives and selves have been constructed not just around their relationships with men, but a lack of such a relationship.

The discussion of the women's relationship with men builds to a climax just prior to the discovery of the suicidal girl, when Ada makes another speech:

Pop songs, sugar and spice and all things nice that's what you're fed on. ... I'll tell you about your kind of love: a few moments' pleasure and then a lifetime kidding yourselves. Caught, bound, even if you don't know it. Or a lifetime looking, like Meg, and wailing what you've missed. Years of ministering to a stranger like them - (*She indicates NELLIE and DOT.*) - or making heroes of your children only to see them stride off and leave you. (Duffy, *Rites* 21)

As well as critiquing the various women's relationships with men, Ada points to what has been going on throughout the play; that is, the construction of gender in discourse. This not only results in an idea of 'man' that is later projected onto the Pentheus figure, but a series of ideas about what constitutes 'woman,' 'girl,' and 'feminine.' This includes both prevailing cultural images of women – the 'pop songs, sugar and spice and all things nice' that Ada mentions – and the societal expectations dictating appropriate behaviour, such as spousal servitude or appropriate sexual conduct. Ada suggests that the women are 'fed' these images and expectations; if that is the case, they also regurgitate them by enacting them anew.

Although Ada criticises the 'feeding' of gender to the other women, she demonstrates that she too is invested in gendered signs. The figure that emerges from a stall while the women are caught up in their frenzied dance is 'suited and coated, short-haired and masculine' (Duffy, *Rites* 24). Ada reads this figure's sex in no uncertain terms and immediately loads onto 'him' the crimes of the gender 'man' that have been collectively invoked throughout the play:

Look a bloody man. In here. Spying on us. ... You think you can get away with murder, that we've no place we can call our own.  
Coming down here to see what we get up to when we're alone.  
Bastard men! (Duffy, *Rites* 24)

The women – now referred to in the script as a chorus for the first time – echo Ada's cry of 'bastard men' before they set upon the figure (ibid.). In contrast to Hersh's assessment about the

biological essentialism of gender in *Rites*, the realisation that the figure was not necessarily a man continues to confound any simple continuity between body, sex, and gender.

Flabbergasted, Ada asks ‘how could we tell; the mouth, the eyes...?’ (ibid.). What has been demonstrated here is that the body and how it is stylised (in this instance through costume) provides no certainty when it comes to gender; the figure may be biologically female but this only becomes a determining factor when as a corpse it is, like the doll that represents the child who enters the bathroom, rendered inert and her sex is, like the doll’s, deduced by projecting a discursive category onto the ‘evidence’ of the body. In effect this is an enactment of the Foucauldian notion that, to borrow Janelle Reinelt’s gloss, ‘anatomy has been combined with other cultural practices and subsumed under the law of sexual identity’ (53). If the figure identified as a woman, her understanding of her gender was evidently different from the category ‘woman’ invoked by the rites of Ada and the others. As Dot’s response to Ada’s questions about the figure’s mouth and eyes suggests, in death it is ‘all the same now’ – there is no meaning in either gender or sex (Duffy, *Rites* 24). The figure becomes nothing more than a body.

An earlier version of the script included a literal ripping apart, with each woman ending up with a piece of the body that they then proceed to ritually dispose of in the incinerator. Ada, of course, had the head, and Norma briefly took on the role of Cadmus in provoking the realisation moment. The cut stage direction read ‘the figure has gone. Ada holds up a waxen head and shrieks with triumph’ (Duffy, Draft of *Rites* n.p.). In this version, one of Ada’s lines present in the final edit is more starkly reminiscent of Agave’s frenzied pleasure in *The Bacchae*: ‘Look at it! I’ve seen prettier in the butcher’s shop. Animals! Bastard men’ (Duffy, *Rites* 24). While the literal *sparagmos* was eventually changed due to issues of practicality (Duffy,

interview), the alternative draws attention to the implications of this sequence, even in the final edit, when read through *The Bacchae*. Just as the 'lion' Agave has killed transpires to be her kin, so does the animal/man Ada has killed turn out to be her 'kin' on the terms set by the space. Butler's notion that the 'breakability is the bond' is affirmed. Feminist 'sisterhood' both finds its limits – this woman is not a woman unless she conforms to a particular gender construction – and is affirmed in spite of gender: this figure may yet be a woman despite not conforming to a particular gender construction.

Wandor reads the murder victim in *Rites* as a butch lesbian (161). In this reading, the play's conclusion reveals a space in which radical feminist solidarity can only be achieved through the purgation of all signs of maleness, including the implied maleness of the lesbian: 'within this hermetic world, hatred of men and homosexuality are revealed as the new taboo' (Wandor 162). Given Duffy's high-profile status as a lesbian, such a reading seems possible, although Babbage is less convinced (108) – the text certainly does not make it explicit that the figure is meant to be read this way. Nevertheless, the play's conclusion does highlight a fault line within feminist activism that continues into the twenty-first century, particularly in relation to second wave radical feminism: an essentialist conception of gender and sex that generalises oppression in a way that excludes the experience of certain groups of women and casts all men, regardless of their own gender expression or politics, as the enemy.<sup>50</sup> *Rites* thus introduces a politics of the body in relation to gender and sex, asking: whose bodies are women-only spaces for? Whose bodies do these spaces – and perhaps, by extension, the feminist tenets that might

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<sup>50</sup> In recent years, this position's reading of transgender identification as 'woman' as illegitimate has caused controversy. In conjunction with continued debate over gender neutral bathrooms, particularly in the USA, a reading of *Rites* along these lines – with the Pentheus figure as a trans woman - would be pertinent. I discuss this further in my conclusion.

support them – need to admit or exclude to be maintained? Is the body actually a politically liberating determinate for gender?

When I interviewed Duffy about *Rites*, she confirmed that the play was partially written as a response to what she saw as a worrying streak of hatred in second wave feminism, citing Valerie Solanas' radical feminist *SCUM Manifesto* in particular (interview). This is in keeping with her published comments on the play:

In a world of stereotypes and attitudes (men do this, women are like that; feminine reaction, masculine response) she [Ada] is society's product if not victim. All reductions of people to objects, all imposition of labels and patterns to which they must confirm, all segregation can lead only to destruction. (Duffy, *Rites* 27)

In our interview, Duffy also asserted that the play was ultimately anti-violence (in line with her views in many of her other published works). *Rites* is thus a play that recognises a parallel between the maenads of *The Bacchae* and feminism but uses that connection to critique the egalitarian efficacy of essentialist difference, segregation, and violence. Just as *The Bacchae* is a Dionysus play that critiques the Dionysiac, so is *Rites* a feminist play that critiques feminism. The concept of the maenad becomes the focus. These women are maenads not because of Dionysus but *because* they are women. Their discursive evocation of gender exposes stark 'us and them' categories that proceed to be destabilised by the narrative. At the same time, gender as a social phenomenon is topographically realised as a space with boundaries that are maintained through active policing; indeed, the illusion of the space's integrity is dependent on this policing. The innocence of the Pentheus victim reveals that the space – and thus gender – is a part of the system that harms women, with the concept of essentialist female sisterhood found to perpetuate violence rather than protect from it. The preset of men building the space

furthermore suggests that the project of essentialist gender only serves patriarchal interests, with the policing of the space and the fostering of murderous hatred towards men found to uphold the misogynist status quo.<sup>51</sup> Duffy's grim vision of maenadic sisterhood thus makes a statement that correlates with Butler's suggestion that kinship needs to be extended beyond gender lines towards a more widely conceived category of the human. It is notable that both Duffy and Butler utilise *The Bacchae* to make their points.

At the end of *Rites*, all of the women return to normality. Ada and Meg are once again alone in the space, picking up the exact thread of conversation they had before any of the other women arrived. The frenzied rage that filled them dissipates, they carry on as normal, and the system goes unchanged. *Rites* thus offers a bleak outlook on the future that is appropriately tragic for an adaptation of *The Bacchae*, concluding Duffy's use of Euripides to offer a critical vision of violence as self-destructive and a feminist politics of essentialist difference as implicated in reinscribing oppression rather than alleviating it. Wandor suggests that at the end of the play 'war between the sexes has been declared,' but if this is the case, certainly it is an observation and not an endorsement (162). *Rites* is a warning, and a part of that warning concerns the limits of gender and sex as productive, meaningful concepts within society and culture, as well as within feminist politics. In this way, it initiates a conversation between *The Bacchae* and second wave feminism that is picked up again in 1986 with *A Mouthful of Birds*.

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<sup>51</sup> Compare this with, for example, Margaret Atwood's misogynist dystopia in the 1985 novel *The Handmaid's Tale*. Here, society is strictly segregated according to gender, with women unable to read or write. Towards the end of the novel, the handmaids – childbearing slaves for men – take part in an authorised 'participation' that is reminiscent of a *sparagmos* (Atwood 290). The authorities hand over a man to the women and tell them he is a rapist – they proceed to collectively murder him. Afterwards, it is revealed that the man was not a rapist but a subversive agent working to bring down the misogynist government – the women have literally done the work of the oppressors for them. For a discussion of the critique of second wave feminism in *The Handmaid's Tale*, see Tolan.

This piece continues the discussion of bodies and violence that Duffy gestures towards in *Rites*, rearticulating them in a new way from a vantage point towards the end of the second wave feminist movement.

### **'Dionysus dances': *A Mouthful of Birds* (1986)**

In *Rites*, gender and its formation in discourse is found to be limiting. In *A Mouthful of Birds* the unfixing of gender enables the proliferation of possibilities. This corresponds to the different approaches taken to the making of feminist theatre at different points of the second wave.

Janelle Reinelt's 1989 essay 'Feminist Theory and the Problem of Performance' reflects on the concept of representation in feminist performance from the late 1960s onwards, tracing three key phases. The earliest phase aimed to increase the number of female characters on stage as 'part of the attempt to articulate a range of women's experiences not previously represented' (48). The next phase, fuelled by a 'growing suspicion of and dissatisfaction with traditional theatrical conventions of representation,' adopted a deconstructive approach, challenging the social construction of gender in a way that could 'point out the ideological character of theatrical representation' (48-49, 49). According to Reinelt, this proved to be overly reliant on an essentialist approach to gender whereby feminist practice constantly observes women and the feminine as the 'negative' – the other, the object, the oppressed – in opposition to a male positive (49-51). The final phase Reinelt charts, still emergent at the time of writing, is heralded by the early work of a new generation of feminist theorists – most notably Butler (51). This phase requires a new formulation of gender theory, specifically that 'gender must be conceived of as a field of experience, socially constructed, constantly changing, not a pair of bi-polar opposites inevitably fixing the subject in relation to an either/or cultural practice' (ibid.). This



move would mean 'giving up the "feminine" as a privileged identity and acknowledging the possibility of multiple nuances and combinations of genders which may eventually bring down the whole historical construction man/woman' (ibid.). Although *Rites* anticipates later gender politics, it clearly belongs to the first phase while *A Mouthful of Birds* epitomises the 'third, reconstructive phase' (it is, in fact, Reinelt's case in point, 52).

Deconstruction and reconstruction are descriptors with special significance for *The Bacchae*, given that the play's finale turns on the dismemberment of Pentheus and Agave's devastation over the pieces of a body that cannot be reassembled. *Rites*, as I have discussed, follows this example, but in *A Mouthful of Birds* reconstruction of identity is possible. In fact, in this piece's representational system the *sparagmos* only tears the body at the symbolic level – more precisely, it destroys an identity that then liberates the body. Pentheus does die, but in *A Mouthful of Birds* he is a figure from the past that possesses a modern character. This is the case for all the ancient characters. Rather than recontextualise the story of *The Bacchae* into the modern world, as with *Rites*, *A Mouthful of Birds* explodes Aristotelian poetics and simplistic mimetic representation by telling the fragmented stories of seven distinct, modern characters, each of which is marginalised in everyday life and society in some way, ranging from unemployment through to mental illness. After a set of introductory vignettes, each of the characters have an extended sequence in which they experience what Churchill and Lan describe as an 'undefended day' (Churchill, 'Author's Notes' 5). This invariably involves possession of some kind – spiritual, mental, and otherwise – by internal or external forces they normally would be able to resist; in surrendering to their possessor, each character's life is dramatically transformed (see Table 1 for a list of these characters and a summary of their narratives). The dancing body of Dionysus is the herald of these undefended days and interspersed amongst the

seven characters' stories are primarily danced episodes from *The Bacchae* in which Pentheus, Agave, and the bacchant possess the modern characters. This disruption of the micro-narratives offers reflections on their development and is what Keyssar refers to as the 'dangerous history' in *A Mouthful of Birds*: a juxtaposition of ancient and modern that allows us to re-frame understanding of both. The decentralisation of a single narrative creates an emphasis on characters and bodies, which becomes the piece's primary means of conveying its deconstructive/reconstructive approach to gender.

Character	Possessed by	Narrative summary
Lena, 'a mother'	Unnamed Bacchant	Begins squeamish and unconfident; visited by a spirit that may be a manifestation of her post-natal depression; she kills her baby; ends up overcoming her squeamishness caring for elderly people
Marcia, 'a switchboard operator'	Unnamed Bacchant	Hides West Indian accent in her workplace; works as a medium but finds herself supplanted by a white psychic called Sybil; ends up at sea
Derek, 'unemployed'	Pentheus	Unemployment connected to his sense of masculinity, spends his time weightlifting; visited by historic intersex person Herculine Barbin, who tells their story to Derek with Derek repeating it back; ends up changed into a woman
Yvonne, 'an acupuncturist'	Unnamed Bacchant	Struggles with anger and alcohol issues; she abuses her mother by cutting her; ends up as a butcher
Paul, 'a businessman'	Dionysus	Works in the meat industry; falls in love with a pig and is devastated when it is slaughtered; overcome with grief, he ends up leaving his job and his wife
Dan, 'a vicar'	Dionysus	Doesn't believe god is necessarily male; turns out to be a mass murderer able to change their sex, killing victims by dancing in a way that makes the victims die from pleasure; ends up in a desert oasis
Doreen, 'a secretary'	Agave	Has a history of mental illness and running away from home; has several violent encounters with her neighbours before discovering an ability to move objects and people with her mind; ends up still in anguish but continues her job

Table 1. Characters, their ancient equivalents, and their story arcs in *A Mouthful of Birds*. Character descriptions are those given in Churchill and Lan (1986).

This movement away from narrative and towards bodies corresponds with a movement away from traditional playmaking. The piece was created through a fairly innovative approach for the time; as Libby Worth has pointed out, the many theatre-makers who contributed to *A Mouthful of Birds* were 'entering unusual theatre-making territory' (173). There certainly were many contributors: it was co-written by Churchill and Lan, co-directed by Les Waters and Ian Spink (who also provided choreography), and designed by Annie Smart – all under the banner of Joint Stock Theatre Company. It was co-produced by the Birmingham Repertory Theatre and the Royal Court. Each of the seven cast members, a mix of dancers and actors by training, also made significant contributions in the extended, twelve-week workshopping and rehearsal process. It seems slightly unfair, therefore, to refer to *A Mouthful of Birds* as 'by' Churchill and Lan – the richly layered text that was produced as a result bears the traces of all the project's collaborators.<sup>52</sup> Nevertheless, highlighting the contributions of three of the creators will illustrate the piece's major thematic and formal concerns as well as the context from which it emerged in 1986.

It was Lan who introduced the idea of possession. Prior to working on the project, Lan had published a book on Zimbabwean spirit possession, and this led him to propose the idea of possession as an act of political resistance (Lan 6). The idea dovetailed with Churchill's interests, and those of the group, forming the starting point for the project. The group's research led them to explore a range of material and experiences encompassing the themes of violence and possession. Churchill reports that members of the company spoke to mediums, women who had been 'given instructions by spirits,' women who had committed violence, and a trans woman;

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<sup>52</sup> It is for this reason that I refer to *A Mouthful of Birds* as a 'piece' rather than a 'play.' While many critics and many of the collaborators on the project use the latter term, I fear it too easily shifts focus onto the text of a project that makes every effort to destabilise text as the dominant producer of meaning.

others 'had a night out with two hundred women watching drag acts and male strippers' and many of the company 'spent a couple of days living and sleeping in the open' ('Author's Notes' 5). As this suggests, possession was defined very broadly – as well as religious possession, the group considered possession 'by forces within as well as without; by memory, by fear, by anxiety, by habit' (Lan 6). The diverse range of individuals involved in this research and the different subjects of their research underscore the piece's embrace of plurality. Each of the seven characters undergo a different experience with a range of outcomes highlighted by their concluding monologues. For some the experience was positive, for others it is more ambiguous or outright negative. Dionysus becomes a symbol of possession that runs throughout the piece, offering a reading of the Dionysiac as defined by plurality, expanding on the homogenised experience of the Theban maenads in *The Bacchae*. As Amelia Howe Kritzer describes it, 'A *Mouthful of Birds* centres on the rediscovery of complexity and multiplicity through the dismemberment of the artificial wholeness of patriarchal subjectivity' (176). This applies to both the modern characters possessed by the spirits of *The Bacchae* – particularly Pentheus, who becomes the symbol for patriarchal subjectivity – and the piece itself, which is 'possessed' by *The Bacchae* and fragments in the process to discover new complexity in Euripides' maenads.

Part of the complexity relates directly to violence and gender, two key themes that, as Howe Kritzer's assessment of the piece's politics indicates, were important. The theatre-makers' investigations into these themes were facilitated by *The Bacchae*; Churchill's record of exploring violent women in her work led Lan and Waters to suggest Euripides' play as source material (Churchill, 'The Common Imagination...' 8). Churchill's interest was piqued by the idea of complicating what she perceived to be essentialist assumptions about women's inherent peacefulness:

At the moment, women are particularly associated with peace, and I was thinking how the traditional view of women was that women were peaceful and men were violent, because it was men who went to war. I found it interesting that the conventional stereotype had, in a way, been kept, but politicized, by women saying 'We stand for peace and men stand for war.' ... *If we are to avoid the danger of a static polarization of women as peaceful and men as violent (and, therefore, men just continuing to be violent), it's perhaps important for women to recognise their capacity for violence, if men are also to recognize their capacity for peacefulness.* (10; emphasis original)

Churchill's phrase 'at the moment' may well refer the Greenham Common women's peace camp. Although this camp was initially a mix between men and women when it began in 1981, the following year it was decided that it should be women only, because 'it was believed that it would be a strong and affirmative message to build a minisociety of only women on a nonhierarchical model. It was also believed that the presence of men would inevitably prompt violence between the police and the protestors' (Cresswell 102). Greenham Common thus became

an important site of feminist rhetorical invention, where nonhierarchical principles and efforts at locating protest ideas from sources connected with women's history, spirituality, and their daily lives created a space where women could gain a glimpse of their own power to resist violent structures of patriarchal control. (Laware 19)

The Greenham women's protest especially drew on the image of women-as-mothers, protecting the children of the future.<sup>53</sup> By turning to a play such as *The Bacchae*, which presents a significant challenge to the concept of women as peaceful and of mothers as protectors of children, Churchill sought to challenge essentialist gendered associations with violence.

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<sup>53</sup> See Shepherd (3-14).

Unlike *Rites*, space is not a means for the interrogation of the piece's themes. Space was not insignificant in Smart's design – the set resembled the cross section of a dilapidated, two-storey house with a tree growing through it – but, if the reviews the production received are any indication, space was overshadowed as a producer of meaning by the performers. This is why Spink's involvement as both co-director and choreographer is so significant: it highlights the emphasis placed on dance, with the body becoming a site for transformation. Partly this is expressed through the distribution of multiple roles to the same performer. In addition to their main character, each performer took secondary roles in the scenes involving other characters, as well as a character from *The Bacchae*. The distribution of roles in the original production suggests this was not merely a pragmatic casting decision, as multi-roling often can be. Instead, the nuances suggested by particular bodies taking on particular characters throughout the piece contributed to the overall meaning. The possession of the contemporary characters by those from *The Bacchae* emphasises this – the audience was invited not to read the multi-roling as actors switching character between scenes, but as characters layering on top of one another. In the video recording of the choreography from the original production, this is particularly apparent with the two men, Stephen Goff and Philippe Giraudeau, playing Dionysus – their reappearance as, for example, the spirit that torments Lena; Paul's porcine lover; and the sexually ambiguous Dan, always carried with it the trace of Dionysus. The performers' bodies thus became palimpsests, with new characters reinscribing themselves onto a site that still bore the trace of previous significations. As a device, this enabled the piece to stage not only re-significations of gender but, in one instance, sex as well. Moreover, the reappearance of the same seven bodies in different combinations and with different characters, interspersed with whole group dance sequences, placed an emphasis on the ensemble of bodies on stage.

The piece's emphasis on the body was expressed through a sophisticated use of dance. Churchill herself suggested that with *A Mouthful of Birds*, she 'wanted to get away from words,' and this was made possible through dance (qtd. in Aston 81). Reviews comment frequently on the dance sequences, and it is not hard to see why, especially when it comes to the whole group dances that punctuated the two or three person spoken scenes. Yet dance is an elusive legacy of the piece. For those who were unable to see the production when it originally toured, and for all those since, the most immediately accessible remains of the central role dance played are found in the descriptive stage directions in Churchill and Lan's printed text. As was the practice of the Royal Court in the period, a printed copy of the text functioned as a programme for the original production, putting it immediately into circulation but also subordinating dance to the written word. The original published text *did* include a note directing those interested in the dance to a video recording of Spink's choreography, but this was removed when the text was printed in a collection of Churchill's other writing some years later; that volume remains the piece's most accessible form. I have managed to locate a copy of the video by contacting Spink, and while it is in many ways illuminating, it is not (as Libby Worth notes) especially helpful in reconstructing the full extent of the danced contribution to the piece – the footage is dark, blurry, and contains only a few of the choreographed sequences (179-180). What is important to note nonetheless is that dance was more than an aesthetic mode in *A Mouthful of Birds* – it was a means of offering an alternative signifying system that paralleled and intersected with the written text, decentralising the spoken word from its privileged position as conveyor of meaning and reorienting audiences to the body in performance. To approach dance here in the context of the original production of *A Mouthful of Birds*, I have relied on a combination of Spink's video and the analyses of those who either saw the production or have since seen the video. Worth's

extended discussion ('Making Movement' 173-250), made as part of her own reflections on choreographing a new production, is particularly valuable given her position as a dance scholar – many of those have written on the production, including myself, are not – and as someone engaging practically with the remaining text in a later period (I discuss the significance of this in the final section of this chapter).

One of Worth's most crucial observations is that the piece's danced sequences and the spoken scenes are not set in binary opposition to one another. It would be misleading to suggest that the ancient violence of the past is represented corporeally, while the contemporary world is represented by scenes of naturalistic dialogue, or that dance signals the metaphysical and the spoken word signals the ordinary ('Making Movement' 184). As Worth argues, '[d]ance extends the expressive possibilities of the performer and allows an economical means of contrasting the surface world of each character with the surging forces of desire that could cause a life to implode or explode' (ibid.). The piece is not organised according to a polarized principle of dance versus spoken word – rather, as I have already suggested, it is their interaction that generates meaning. For example, in the first 'undefended day' of the piece, Lena is haunted by a spirit that urges her to kill her baby – the spirit, embodied by another member of the company, can be read as a corporeal representation of Lena's postnatal depression. The audience witness Lena's struggle with the spirit through both spoken and danced exchanges; together, these sequences demonstrate the disruption of Lena's ordinary life by the extraordinary energies of possession and enact a transformation. What is not apparent in the printed text is the aural dimension of this sequence. This comes across starkly in the video footage, however: a succession of animalistic noises made by the performers as they dance that, in concert with movement, helps to tear away from the mimetic 'reality' of the scene. They emphasise that what



Lena is experiencing is both possession by an external force and the emergence of an inner primalism. This informs the character's overall arc: Lena, who begins the piece too squeamish to skin a rabbit, comes to recognise her potential for violence, valuing it alongside her capacity to create life.

As I have mentioned, in 1986 the actor playing the spirit in Lena's sequence, Stephen Goff, also played one of the piece's two embodiments of Dionysus, demonstrating the way in which the use of bodies and movement became the connecting thread for the Dionysiac. A *Mouthful of Birds* in fact begins with one of these Dionysus figures: the title of the sequence in the printed text is 'DIONYSOS dances' (3). The god was represented by the body of a slim but muscular male dancer (in this instance, Giraudeau) with a bare chest, a long white petticoat, and a wig of long braided hair (the latter is only apparent on the video recording). The wordless movements of this figure, designed with a combination of signifiers associated with ideas about the 'masculine' and 'feminine,' exemplifies the transformative potential of ambiguity that characterises the piece's conception of the Dionysiac. The audience are offered no firm indicators of who this figure is or what the figure is supposed to mean. Those unfamiliar with *The Bacchae* or unaware of the adaptive connection would have had no way of identifying the figure – unlike Euripides' play, there is no spoken declaration of the god's arrival. Instead, the audience were presented with an ambiguous sign – a dancing male body in women's clothing – setting the tone for what is to come. Worth reads this opening, alongside the first scene of dialogue between Lena and her husband, as an indication not to trust surfaces, emphasising the potential differences between what is within and the 'skins' that contain internal matter, as well as drawing attention to ways in which surfaces and the hidden contents within are read and interpreted ('Making Movement' 184). The unfixed sign of the dancing body; the contrast

between ambiguous surfaces and hidden interiors; and the uncertain necessity of interpreting signs to generate meaning; all of these are explored throughout via the interactions between spoken word and dance. This interaction is also the primary way in which the encounter between ancient myth and contemporary life is expressed, but in a way that complicates simplistic binaries.

For Reinelt, the use of dance in another Dionysus sequence exemplifies the qualities in *A Mouthful of Birds* that make it part of her 'reconstructive' phase of feminist theatre (53). Goff also played Dan, one of the modern characters. While Dan is first introduced as a vicar who doesn't 'believe God is necessarily male,' his later scenes reveal that he is an imprisoned mass murderer who has inexplicably changed sex from male to female (Churchill and Lan 7). During his 'undefended day,' a discussion between baffled prison guards is punctuated by glimpses of how Dan murders his victims. Each time, Dan dances in front of the victim, who sits on a chair wearing a hat. Each time, the dance is 'precisely the dance that the [victim, two women and a man] in the chair longs for. Watching it she [or he] dies of pleasure' (23). Finally, Dan dances in front of an empty chair that has no victim on it, just the hat. The prison guards, incredulous that their prisoner seems to keep miraculously escaping and killing other prisoners, eventually decide to let Dan go. For Reinelt, Dan's dancing causes his victims' 'gender specific identities to vanish – leaving only the hat, unmarked by gender, to mark the site of seduction' (53). She notes that the prison guards are 'confounded by their inability to guarantee a sexual difference' (ibid.). The scene ultimately demonstrates the same Foucauldian notion I identified as being present in *Rites*, that 'anatomy has been combined with other cultural practices and subsumed under the law of sexual identity' (53). But whereas *Rites* is resigned in its observation of this notion, in *A Mouthful of Birds* 'the alternative' is demonstrated on stage – 'a diffused, multivalenced sexuality

which escapes and exceeds the current representations of defined sexuality, thus the hat on the empty chair' (53). In this sense, the piece's representation of Dan/Dionysus demonstrates its interpretation of the Dionysiac as opening up possibilities marked by both pleasure and violence, achieving this through dance in combination with dialogue.

Dan's scenes echo Dionysus in *The Bacchae*, combining religious imagery with violence, defying custody and confounding gender polarity. These allusions affirm the significance of Dan's doubling with the god made apparent through Goff's body. They also underscore the piece's relationship with Dionysus. In *The Bacchae*, Dionysus is only partially understood if it is on the same terms as a human character operating in a narrative, because he also functions as a force that collapses binaries and draws attention to mimetic signification. In performance, his human qualities often obscure his role as a force or principle – Dionysus is so often conceived of as the star, his overwhelming charisma demands focus on his persona as a character. In *A Mouthful of Birds*, Dionysus does not function as 'a god, or a representative of any organised belief system' but is instead a 'model of nature' (Howe Kritzer 178). Although he opens and closes the play with his dancing, he never speaks. This is a result of the piece's dramaturgical and stylistic structures – contemporary characters 'haunted' by *The Bacchae* and dance operating as significantly as spoken text (even if dance is harder to situate in analyses of the piece for those who did not witness some or all of it). It produces a representational economy that allows *A Mouthful of Birds* to move past the charisma of Dionysus as a character and emphasise his function as a device that initiates transformation. Consequently, room is opened up to explore other characters in more detail, particularly the maenads.

Worth observes that the piece 'does not propose group or community engagement with excess ... [as a] means of coping with the everyday. Instead they [Churchill and Lan] focus on

the individual's attempt to resolve the clash between inner and outer experience' ('Making Movement' 184). As such, *A Mouthful of Birds* is not interested in collective action in the same way as *Rites*, at least on one level: its fragmentary foci are seven individuals and their discrete, if diverse, experiences. All the play's characters do come together, though, when they experience collective possession by the characters from *The Bacchae*. This takes place in three sequences spread throughout the piece: 'Fruit Ballet,' 'Extreme Happiness,' and 'The Death of Pentheus' (Churchill and Lan 16, 33, 50; only the first is preserved on Spink's recording). While there are some words spoken immediately before, after, or during these sequences, all three are primarily danced. 'Fruit Ballet,' situated between two moments of possession in which Agave and Pentheus talk about the latter's *sparagmos*, 'consists of a series of movements mainly derived from eating fruit. It emphasises the sensuous pleasures of eating and the terrors of being torn up' (16). 'Extreme Happiness,' which closes the first act, 'consists of memories of moments of extreme happiness' (33); it turns into a version of the miracles reported by the first messenger in *The Bacchae*. 'The Death of Pentheus' repeats 'moments of extreme happiness and of violence from earlier,' with all of the characters apart from Derek/Pentheus dressed as their main character (50).

These three sequences collapse the distinction between pleasure and terror, reinforcing the piece's conception of the Dionysiac indexed by Dan/Dionysus: that possession and consequent transformation is a process marked by both pleasure and terror, experienced in a manner that exceeds the ordinary and the spoken word. Furthermore, while Worth is right in observing that the piece never brings the modern characters together literally to find a way through their Dionysiac possessions, these danced sequences derived from *The Bacchae* become the occasion during which their disparate struggles briefly align, their undefended days merging

in the memory – or perhaps vision – of the maenads' experience on Cithaeron. The maenadic kinship found in the piece is thus purely performative, established by temporarily exceeding the boundaries of the individual in the act of dancing together. As the choreography of the collective sequences indexes the maenads on Cithaeron (the miracles, the *sparagmos*), and as they are carefully placed throughout the piece – often alongside fragments of text from *The Bacchae* – the performance as a whole thus appears to be suspended in the moment of maenadic secondment from ordinary life.

These collective experiences of course have implications for the characters, enabling them to acknowledge and submit to the pleasure/terror of transformation. The violence and the suffering of their individual possessions are recast to be indistinguishable, as Hersh's assessment of 'Fruit Ballet' suggests (420). The video footage of this sequence confirms this: the choreography unifies the disparate characters in gestures that draw attention to arms, feet, and throats – in other words, the parts of Pentheus that will be gripped in his dismemberment – but frames this as enjoyable more than anything else. Thus both the pleasurable and terrifying aspects of violence become necessary parts of the experiences the characters are going through – something that must be embraced. The danced element is crucial to this. The characters experience possession in their separate scenarios in scenes of spoken dialogue interspersed with dance. In each of the three collective sequences, the boundaries set by the fragmented reality of these scenes is exceeded until it transcends words altogether. In the process, dance firmly points to the body as the medium through which transformation occurs.

The three sequences are characterised by the gradual emergence of Agave and the Bacchantes as distinct possessors of the female characters' bodies. Doreen's first possession by Agave occurs just before 'Fruit Ballet,' and 'Extreme Happiness' ends with all four of the women

on stage being possessed by maenads (called Bacchantes in the printed text). It is 'The Death of Pentheus' that serves as a climax, not only for the three collective danced sequences but for the individual character arcs as well. Agave and the three Bacchantes possess women who, in their own scenarios, all commit violence against other women. Lena kills her baby daughter; Yvonne cuts her mother; Marcia wrestles for control with Sybil; and Doreen fights with her neighbour Mrs Blair. As Raima Evan's insightful reading of the women's scenarios suggests, the violence experienced and enacted by the women is, in fact, generated by a capitalist patriarchal system invested in turning women against other women rather than directing their efforts against the structures that oppress them (269).

Evan's analysis looks closely at how the violence of each of the women manifests and is represented in performance. Lena's husband is the source of her anguish (272). Yvonne's attacks on her mother, fuelled either by alcohol or her cravings for it, are suggested to be a repetition of her father's abusive behaviour, as well as the violence of other men in Yvonne and her mother's community (275). Marcia the Trinidadian medium, first seen working as a switchboard operator for a sexually abusive man, is the 'epitome of the disempowered woman of colour, colonized by the white male boss' (278). Her experience is the 'result of racist and classist ideologies that dehumanize her' – in her scenario she fights with Sybil, the spirit of a middle-class white woman who embodies a 'racist dominant discourse' that gradually comes to appropriate Marcia's culture while completely silencing her own voice (269, 279). Although Evan does not quite make the explicit connection, there is also a sense of Marcia's culture being erased by the dominance of the classical world as adopted by white, patriarchal mainstream culture as ideal – a sibyl was an ancient oracular woman who acted as the mouthpiece for a male god such as Apollo or Zeus (significantly not Dionysus). Finally, Doreen seems to internalise and channel the violence in

everyday discourse, turning her pain-fuelled rage against those who are simply in her vicinity – she is trapped within a violent system (281, 282). At the end of Lena, Yvonne, and Marcia's possession scenarios, there is ambiguity as to what will happen to them afterwards: they wait to face the consequences of their actions (Lena), teeter on the edge of disaster (Yvonne), or continue to suffer (Marcia). Doreen's scenario, however, leads straight into 'The Death of Pentheus,' providing resolution for all four women.

As Hersh suggests, 'The Death of Pentheus' constitutes 'a dramatic microcosm for all the emotions represented throughout the play, as fragments of each preceding dance combine to form the collective murder of Pentheus' (421). The four women, each of whom has suffered under a patriarchal capitalist system and directed their resulting violence against other women, attack and destroy a symbol of the elite and of the patriarchy. Pentheus' dressing up as a woman also reflects the scapegoating of women enacted by patriarchal oppression. It is appropriate that the women attack Pentheus' body, tearing it apart (symbolically, not literally) – it connects to their own possessions by the Dionysiac, which Evan notes all begin in the body (266). In this way, the women turn the pain that has impacted their bodies against a figure set up to embody the ultimate source of that pain.

The women are not solely concerned with weaponizing their own inherited pain: the attack on Pentheus is an effort to preserve the pleasure of their Dionysiac experiences. The transition between Doreen's scenario, 'Hot Summer,' and 'The Death of Pentheus' is important here – it ends with Doreen and two of her friends 'repeating yes and laughing,' revelling in the telekinetic powers they seem to have miraculously acquired as part of their possession; these two friends are played by actors the audience is aware also embody other main characters they have seen (Lena and Yvonne; Churchill and Lan 50). Immediately afterwards, Derek-as-Pentheus

begins chanting 'Kill the god!', threatening to end the pleasure experienced by Doreen and her female friends, who are symbolically also two of the other main women the audience have seen suffer (50). 'The Death of Pentheus' is therefore a moment that completes the collapse of terror and pleasure into one act; breaking through the limitations set by their spoken individual scenarios, the women collectively destroy the patriarchal body, the source of their suffering and a threat to their pleasure, and rejoice in doing so.

This act creates a new community. According to Howe Kritzer, the site of Pentheus' death becomes a 'site of fragmentation and loss, but also of power and change' (182). While the Bacchantes initially suggest they have to leave immediately to attend to their domestic responsibilities, Agave's decision to stay – because 'there's nothing there for me there. There never was' – prompts all of the women to join her (Churchill and Lan 50). For Howe Kritzer, this decision forms a community 'which fuses the power of possession and decision' (182), while for Laura Nutten it is a decision to stay 'elsewhere to convention' (8). Rather than return to the fold of the system they have temporarily subverted with their terrible/pleasurable act of violence, the women, in Babbage's words, 'hold on to their experience and take responsibility for its consequences, using the knowledge gained in the final choices they make' (114). In other words, the events of the collective possession sequence seep into the lives of the contemporary characters, enabling them to embrace change. This is a highly significant departure from Euripides' play, which ends with the shaming and exile of Agave, and is one of the most prominent features of Churchill and Lan's act of adaptation. As Hersh explains: 'This lack of denial of agency in *A Mouthful of Birds* radically rescripts the notion of guilt, expiation and castigation which serve as the conclusion for *The Bacchae*, a conclusion which reinforces the patriarchal order' (422). Whereas in *Rites*, the women are horrified by their act and then



proceed to quickly move on back to their lives, in *A Mouthful of Birds* the women are able to own the act and allow it to impact how they move forward.

The notion of kinship as theorised by Butler is again illuminating here. All of the characters have their traditional kinship ties disrupted or troubled in some way in their individual scenes before coming together via this collective experience to form their maenadic kinship ties that are bounded by the moment of performance. The characters, as separate as they are from one another, become united as mutual participants in an act that impacts them all. Crucially – considering the difference from the maenadic kinship established in *Rites* – this applies beyond gender, becoming inclusive of the men as much as it does the women. The two characters paired with Dionysus, Dan and Paul, initiate the death of Pentheus and witness it; Derek, who is possessed by Pentheus, is a participant of a different kind. The new kinship ties of this Dionysiac community are thus extended to all three. Butler notes that kinship is the site of ‘murderous pleasure and infinite remorse’; the community going into the final part of *A Mouthful of Birds* – the post-possession monologues – reflects this (‘Kinship Trouble...’). This is important to recognise, given that not all of the characters end the piece in a positive state – some are left with much more remorse than pleasure.

Derek’s encounter with Herculine Barbin (discussed below) and possession by Pentheus – and subsequent transformation following the death of his possessor – are remarkable features of *A Mouthful of Birds*, and have been lauded by many critics as some of the most sophisticated and theatrically compelling aspects of the entire piece.<sup>54</sup> The possession scenario is not only

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<sup>54</sup> The most influential discussion is in Elin Diamond’s ‘(In)Visible Bodies in Churchill’s Theatre’; she notes the Escher-like ‘impossible object’ created by the image of Herculine Barbin turning back to kiss Derek on the neck (203). See also Aston (84-85), Babbage (120-121), Howe Kritzer (179), Reinelt (53-55), and Worth (‘Images of Women...’ 21-22).

characterised by intense pleasure and remorse, but it leads to Derek's admission into the kinship of the final community in spite of gender and sex. This is what Babbage describes as the 'creation of the re-membered self' (121). While Pentheus is ripped apart, Derek finds himself liberated from the same oppressive patriarchal force that caused the women to suffer. In fact, in his final monologue, he has *become* a woman:

My breasts aren't big but I like them. My waist isn't small but it makes me smile. My shoulders are still strong. And my new shape is the least of it. I smell light and sweet. I come into a room, who has been here? Me. My skin used to wrap me up, now it lets the world in. Was I this all the time? I've almost forgotten the man who possessed this body. I can't remember what he used to be frightened of. I'm in love with a lion-tamer from Kabul. Every day when I wake up, I'm comfortable. (Churchill and Lan 52)

The actor who played Derek in the original production, Christian Burgess, was male. The audience were invited, however, to re-read Burgess' body in alignment with his self-identification as a woman. Derek's identity as a man has been reconceived as a result of his temporary possession by Pentheus – or the patriarchal, essentialist system that Pentheus represents. This conclusion, in which the piece's Pentheus-figure initially presents discontinuity between their gender and sex but survives subsequent violent trauma to reach a celebratory state, is the inverse of the situation in *Rites*. Derek's body is allowed to transform in the piece's economy of representation, resulting in a positive outcome that both disavows essentialism and suggests the possibilities of a body freed from the restrictive typification of gendering discourse.

I have already discussed Reinelt's observation of the Foucauldian traces in Dan/Dionysus, but Foucault was also a clear influence on the creation of Derek (Diamond, '(In)Visible

Bodies...' 202 n. 31).<sup>55</sup> In Derek's 'undefended day,' he encounters Herculine Barbin, the historical intersex person (Churchill and Lan follow Foucault's cue and use 'hermaphrodite') identified as a woman at birth and later declared as a man by a court of law; she subsequently committed suicide. At the beginning of the 1980s, Foucault had provided an introduction to Barbin's 'recently discovered' memoirs. In that introduction, Foucault asks whether a person 'truly needs a true sex' (vii; emphasis original). *A Mouthful of Birds* takes up that question in relation to Derek. When the audience first encounter Derek, he is an unemployed man weightlifting with two other men. Their discussion reveals the precarity of a man's identity without a job, a topical concern given the widespread unemployment in the UK in the 1980s (Babbage 120). As Aston observes, this weightlifting 'marks the body in the sphere of the masculine,' drawing attention to the corporeal (84). It seems that Derek is attempting to reify his masculinity by continually refining his male body. He is again weightlifting at the beginning of his possession scenario. This time he encounters Barbin, played by a woman (Tricia Kelly in the original production), who recites a long monologue detailing her life. As she does so, she passes items of significance to Derek, such as a rose, a crucifix, and a petticoat. Derek then arrays himself in the objects and repeats the monologue. In this sense, he becomes Barbin: 'Herculine's words, repeated, are now his; her memories are discovered as his own submerged knowledge' (Babbage 121). Throughout Derek's recitation of the monologue, the female actor takes back her objects, and he is eventually left in a mournful state. As Babbage writes, 'Derek's possession and dispossession communicate the pain of socio-sexual alienation' (121). Through his Dionysiac encounter, however, he is able to be freed of the structures that repress him – imagined in the

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<sup>55</sup> Foucault's work has had a prolonged and profound impact on Churchill's work. Two years prior to *A Mouthful of Birds*, Churchill had written *Softcops*, which is inspired by Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1975).

piece as Pentheus – and finds comfort in his own skin, avoiding the fate the historical Barbin suffered. In the process, the piece demonstrates the ‘unfixing’ of gendered bodies (Aston 84). It is a positive and progressive conclusion.

This is not the case for all the characters, most notably Doreen. Possessed by Agave, Doreen demonstrates that even though the piece gestures hopefully towards the possibilities opened by up Dionysiac possession, particularly the collapsing of essentialist gender, it also remains cognizant of the ongoing trauma that results from the violence inherent in the capitalist patriarchal system that continues to impact women. As I have already discussed, through Doreen we see the effects of violence in discourse on human relations – it is internalised, perceived as a pain without a definite source, and eventually expressed in violent acts. In her ‘undefended day,’ a scene entitled ‘Hot Summer,’ a friend reads out news stories about extreme violent acts, often carried out between men and women, sometimes sexual, and sometimes echoing situations from the earlier in the piece (a mother murdering her baby daughter, for example; Churchill and Lan 45-46). Doreen, who has previously complained that she is ‘completely full of this awful sickness,’ a mysterious pain in her body that she cannot seem to expel, launches into a violent confrontation with her neighbour, Mrs. Blair, which is juxtaposed by the continuous reading out of the news stories (45, 46-47). In Doreen’s subsequent encounter with a male neighbour, the threat of violence lurks behind ordinary interactions:

TONY: Hi, we’ve seen each other in the hall, my name’s Tony. I’m sorry to bother you but I wonder if you could let me have a teabag?  
I forgot I was out of tea when I went -

DOREEN: You come in a room where I’m perfectly peaceful. How do I know what you are? Teabag? You could be going to put a sack over my head. You could have a knife but I have knife so think again. / My sister lives with a man who

TONY: Look I only -

DOREEN: pour boiling water over her and she thinks it's her fault.

TONY: Lady, I don't need this.

DOREEN: Anyone can do it. There's nothing that can't be used as a weapon. Chair. String. A cup of hot tea.

TONY: You are a crazy, you know that? Suck my cock. It's a hot night. Now. Let's just -

TONY *goes*.

DOREEN: Tear you up. (48)

In *The Bacchae*, the Theban maenads turn violent when their peace is interrupted by male intruders who attempt to capture them. Doreen, who has internalised the ambient violence all around her in her society and culture, anticipates violence from her own male intruder, even though his intentions seem mundane. The violent and the mundane have collapsed for her ('There's nothing that can't be used as a weapon'), echoing the collapse between contemporary and ancient world that she herself is drawn towards and her possession scenario immediately precedes ('Tear you up'). As the piece draws towards its climax, violence is everywhere – internal and external to the body – and it works to corrode human interaction. Before Doreen's scenario ends, however, she is briefly able to turn her rage into joy by discovering an ability, along with her other female friends, to make objects fly without touching them.

Although Doreen achieves this fantastical, joyous power at the end of her own scenario, and her subsequent possessor Agave makes a choice to reject her old life, the final monologue finds Doreen unable to escape her reality:

I can find no rest. My head is filled with horrible images. I can't say I actually see them, it's more that I feel them. It seems that my mouth is full of birds which I crunch between my teeth. Their feathers, their blood and broken bones are choking me. I carry on my work as a secretary. (Churchill and Lan 53)

Unlike Derek, who finds release in the destruction of his mythical counterpart, Doreen does not have the luxury to retain the pleasures of her possession; while mythical Agave can embrace her transgressive behaviour, the real woman Doreen remains trapped, still afflicted by the pain and terror she originally suffered from – and perhaps intensified by her experience (Diamond, '(In)Visible Bodies...' 204). The juxtaposition between her and Derek's final status – her lack of solace and his newly found comfort – further emphasises the unsettling tone. When Dionysus dances again in the piece's closing moments, ambiguity is once again signalled. This time, the ambiguity is to whether the Dionysiac experience of possession guarantees a happy ending. In the video of the choreography, this sequence is all the more troubling because Giraudeau wears a combination of his character's costume and Dionysus' wig: the Dionysiac has merged with the human and the potential for violent excess is within the body.

It is surely no accident that in this piece of overtly gender-conscious drama, there is a hierarchy of possibilities that finds that women continue to experience difficulties men do not. As Maryam Soltan Beyad and Tahereh Rezaei argue, Doreen's example 'reveals that with all attempts at bringing change to the life of women, they are still disadvantaged' (19). That Doreen is paired with Agave is both appropriate and ironic – as with Agave in *The Bacchae*, Doreen remains horrified by violence, but it is ironic that the woman who leads the charge against Pentheus is the one who cannot escape the pain of the system that he represents. Howe Kritzer writes that '[n]either the terrible act of resistance nor the multiple transformations that culminate in a vision of non-patriarchal subjectivity for some of the characters have dislodged the actual structure of patriarchal power' (182). No matter the tempting potentiality offered by the Dionysiac space of the theatre, the patriarchal structures beyond remain in place. This is the

advantage of the piece's emphasis on plurality: while the vision of complexity and multiplicity offered provides a hopeful future for some, it reaffirms the struggles that remain for others.

Several critics have commented on Doreen's final statement – that she continues to work as a secretary – linking it to the critique of capitalism that runs through the entire piece. The dual associations of secretarial work with women and with servitude to a presumed male superior suggest Doreen's trapped position is both economically inflected and bound up in her gender.<sup>56</sup> Diamond suggests that Doreen's final monologue characterises her as 'docile and productive' in contrast to the still active Dionysus (204), but I concur with Evan in her alternative reading:

Despite the facade she presents – a secretary at her desk, keeping things in order, facilitating the smooth operation of the workaday world – Doreen only barely manages to endure her agony. One is left with the distinct impression that despite her efforts to "carry on," Doreen will soon find it impossible to maintain her control, to keep her mouth closed upon the violent churning within her. (283)

Evan goes on to suggest that Dionysus' final dance shifts the onus for action to the audience. This is in line with Keyssar's conceptualisation of *A Mouthful of Birds* as dangerous history. In staging the daring possibilities of a 'vision of non-patriarchal subjectivity' (Howe Kritzer 182) and a 'subject-in-process practicing resistance, exploding the strait jacket of gender' (Reinelt 52) – while also signalling that there is work still to be done beyond the theatre – *A Mouthful of Birds* attempts to leave the audience with the political impetus to enact change. The contrasting

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<sup>56</sup> Churchill is, of course, acutely aware of the oppressive conditions inflicted by the subduction of women's precarious gendered position in society into a capitalist economy, as demonstrated by perhaps her most famous play, *Top Girls* (1982).

conclusions between Derek and Doreen – as well as the variety of endings for the other characters – also affirm the piece's commitment to representing a plurality of experiences.

Critics have also drawn a range of conclusions from imagery employed in Doreen's final monologue that gives the piece its name. Aston suggests that this indicates Doreen's repression of the memory of her possession in order to carry on in the everyday world – that the violence and the joy of the 'extreme experiences' have collapsed into the image of the mouthful of birds (84). Evan has a similar interpretation, suggesting that a series of binaries along the lines of terror/pleasure collapse in Doreen's 'ominous' final words – 'a mouthful of blood and song, horror and beauty, death and new beginnings' (284). The mouthful is also the violence at work in 'the very fabric of our culture' and thus is ultimately 'our language, our network of discourses' (284). That Doreen has internalised discursive violence and experiences it as bodily pain indicates an enduring power attributed to words that the piece's privileging of corporeality and dance cannot overcome. There is, however, a suggestion from Nutten that Dionysiac liberation – the 'madness' of possession – may be problematic: 'Significantly birds, common symbols of flight and liberty, are what smother her, intimating that signs of freedom (including madness) may not always be what they seem' (9). This corresponds to Diamond's reading ('(In)Visible Bodies...' 204). These critics understand Doreen's final lines to be programmatic for the piece itself and it seems likely, given that the lines refer back to the piece's title, that this was intentional, whatever the specifics of the interpretation.

Babbage notes that in classical literature, the chattering of birds is a 'recurrent metaphor for the speech of women; for the 'gibberish' of foreigners; and for the language of the unquiet dead' (135). Babbage reads this as beneath the level of 'rational' speech, 'the voice of the marginalised, the disempowered and the disappeared: resisting mastery, striving to make itself



heard' (135). What afflicts Doreen may be as much the pain of so many voices struggling to be heard as violent patriarchal discourse itself. In *A Mouthful of Birds*, the voices of women combine with the voices of the unquiet dead, reflecting the politics of this dangerous history – the birds Doreen crunches are the bones of *The Bacchae*, or rather the experiences and warnings echoed in that myth and ancient play. The multiple, competing voices that the piece attempts to convey – that are, perhaps, continuing to wrestle in Doreen's body – are reflected in its form as a collection of vignettes, ancient and modern. The difficult, violent character of *The Bacchae* is read through the lens of a gender-conscious group of progressive theatre-makers, including a feminist playwright. The result is an attempt to render the piece as polyvocal, polymorphic and polysemic. Although it admits new voices and bodies into the Dionysiac, and expands upon the experiences of the maenads, it ultimately highlights (in contrast to mythic liberation) the continued difficulties women faced in the 1980s.

### **After Cithaeron: Traces of *Rites* and *A Mouthful of Birds***

Both *Rites* and *A Mouthful of Birds* present formal and stylistic challenges to Euripides' play. They reconfigure the parts of the narrative the audience is able to witness, reframing how the audience experience it. They reinvent the chorus, building it up from a group of individuals over the course of the performances until they finally come together, with devastating effect, to enact the murder of a Pentheus-figure. Perhaps most strikingly, they dismantle what has commonly been taken for the centrepiece of *The Bacchae* – Dionysus and his rivalry with Pentheus – to make maenads the unequivocal subjects of their retellings. The pieces' distance from conventional forms, styles, and readings of *The Bacchae* may seem to render these adaptations' relationship to Euripides little more than incidental, but the opposite is the case. Certainly both

of the female playwrights involved in the creation of these pieces understood *The Bacchae* as offering images of women engaging in collective resistance and in violent acts – images that proved formative for their adaptations. Duffy suggests outright that *The Bacchae* is about women (interview); Churchill found that Euripides' play resonated with her interests in violent women ('The Common Imagination...' 8). Furthermore, the raw material offered by *The Bacchae* facilitated reflection on strands of second wave feminism – this was also not incidental.

By centring the maenad in their adaptations of *The Bacchae*, *Rites* and *A Mouthful of Birds* underscore the fundamental role gender has in the mechanics of Euripides' play. They proceed to make use of those mechanics to interrogate gender. The strategic decision to recast Dionysus from character to concept enables both pieces to couch Pentheus and his fate in maenadic, rather than Dionysiac, terms: in *Rites*, the Pentheus-figure dies because they fail to be recognised by the women in the toilets as maenadic kin; in *A Mouthful of Birds*, Pentheus may possess Derek, but in undergoing an 'undefended day' like the other characters, he is, in practice, a maenad. By the end of the piece he identifies as a woman, and the inclusion of Derek in the piece's conception of maenadism is part of its radical significance. This demonstrates another important aspect of both adaptations: while maenads are at the centre, their existence is never taken for granted – how one becomes a maenad, what they have in common, and why they embrace their maenadism are key questions in each piece. It follows that both pieces disavow the maenad as a monolithic construction, taking pains to establish the diversity of their experiences. In finding the common cause that brings each piece's maenads together, Cithaeron and the events that unfold there become fundamentally incorporated into the piece's adaptive strategies. In *Rites* Cithaeron becomes the site in which the action takes place and that spatialises the maenads' sense of kinship. In *A Mouthful of Birds*, however, Cithaeron only comes into

existence in brief moments when the disparate group of characters dance together, building towards the moment of Pentheus' death.

For all the similarities between the pieces, there are of course distinctions as well. *Rites* is fascinated by and sympathetic to the maenad, but remains suspicious of her nonetheless. The play manages to evince reasons why a female-only space may be necessary and, indeed, welcome in a society where there is such hostility between men and women. But it does so while also literally showing that such spaces can be a patriarchal construction and ultimately serve patriarchal ends, proliferating violence done against women when the category of woman is defined according to narrow, essentialist definitions perpetuated by gendered discourse. It goes on to pointedly observe that the category of women is more diverse than much discourse – feminist and otherwise – allows for. *A Mouthful of Birds* goes further: it is not so much about the maenad as it is the maenad *in process*. It traces the ways that the Dionysiac comes to impact the individual lives of those oppressed by a capitalist patriarchal society, charting their extraordinary journeys through possession to the moment of their maenadism. Unlike *Rites*, the piece spends time considering what happens *after* Cithaeron: what happens when the dance ends, when the women have to leave their own space. The outcomes are as diverse as the maenads themselves. While queer possibilities are opened up by embracing the multiplicity of gendered identity, the piece never forgets that the system that fuelled the need for Dionysus' possession – and created so much ambient violence – disproportionately impacts women.

Violence is one point on which the adaptations concur, despite seeming to take opposing stances (Duffy's play is staunchly anti-violence, while Churchill and her collaborators wanted to trouble essentialist assumptions by reasserting women's capacity to be violent). This is because both adaptations demonstrate that violence is not the result of arbitrary divine

madness sent by a god as punishment against a royal family. Rather, the violence of the maenads is inherited from the system in which they live – it is the product of their oppression as women or queer men, and of a society in which violence characterises many kinds of human exchange. The pieces also go beyond *The Bacchae* by granting agency to the women who inflict violence against Pentheus – they are not puppets for a divine force, as one might read Agave and the Theban maenads in Euripides' play, but are cognizant of their actions, even if they are in a frenzied state. Furthermore, in *A Mouthful of Birds* the women are able to take responsibility for what they do, carrying forward the transformations that it brings about.

The centrality of maenads and the reframing of their violence make *Rites* and *A Mouthful of Birds* crucial additions to the performance history of *The Bacchae*. In Perris' *The Gentle, Jealous God*, he finds *Dionysus in 69* to be 'a model for sex- and gender-inflected *Bacchae* adaptations' (54). Given that *Dionysus in 69* is obsessed with its eponymous god and his rivalry with Pentheus whilst being demonstrably misogynistic, asserting the alternative, feminist model provided by *Rites* and *A Mouthful of Birds* is essential. Certainly the creators of these adaptations provide a much more nuanced engagement with sex and gender – consider, for example, Duffy's exploration of gender's creation in discourse or the astonishing complexity of Derek's encounter with Herculine Barbin. Yet it is perhaps because these adaptations run counter to dominant post-Schechner readings in both theatre and scholarship – resisting Euripides in their rewriting – that they have been perceived as sitting outside of the performance history of *The Bacchae* proper. Perhaps this is where they would like to sit, in acknowledgement of their wilful distancing from the original play. Nevertheless, *Rites* and *A Mouthful of Birds* are as much adaptations as *Dionysus in 69* and offer significant new dimensions to any understanding of how

*The Bacchae* has been engaged with in the modern world. Their marginal position is, of course, part of their offering to that performance history.

For those who do want to acknowledge these adaptations, the precariousness of the archive presents problems, as I have discovered. Despite both adaptations working in complex ways in live performance, the most comprehensive available testimonies for the original productions in 1969 and 1986 remain the published texts – and, for *A Mouthful of Birds*, a handful of black-and-white photographs in the original programme/printed text (these are not included in Nick Hern Books' more recent *Caryl Churchill: Plays: Three*). The National Theatre archive once held photographs of the original production of *Rites* but when I went to consult the collection in May 2017, the archivist was unable to locate them and concluded that they must be lost. Losses to the archive afflict *A Mouthful of Birds* as well, in an even more crucial way: the recording of the original choreography is not so readily available as the text and is, in any case, incomplete. The gap opened up by being unable to fully account for dance in *A Mouthful of Birds* is troubling, but this demonstrates the significance of needing to address and recover not only the texts of receptions of *The Bacchae*, but their live-texts as well. This is a crucial part of what these receptions offer the performance history of Euripides' play, and the difficulty of accounting for it remains one of the lingering questions left by the dancing bodies of *A Mouthful of Birds*.

There is another way that the integral role of dance in *A Mouthful of Birds* has made it a notable part of the performance history of *The Bacchae*. Raima Evan argues that *A Mouthful of Birds* implies a 'gesture backward and a gesture forward' – to *The Bacchae* and the myth it adapts, and to the 'new, as yet unknown text that will be born from *A Mouthful of Birds*' (284). While the piece has inspired the creation of at least one wholly new text, Ché Walker's *The*

*Lightning Child* (2014), I would add live-texts to Evan's suggestion: the new choreographies and the new resonances accrued by successive productions of *A Mouthful of Birds*. Worth, who writes of the 'tempting lacunae' left by the stage directions for dance in the published text, demonstrates this incisively in her work around developing new choreography for the piece ('Making Movement' 180). Worth is able to practically explore the textual remains left by Churchill, Lan, and the other collaborators from Joint Stock, engaging with them from a new perspective two decades later. This work of re-engagement draws on *A Mouthful of Birds*, of course, but also on *The Bacchae* and on feminist politics, in both familiar and new ways, reflecting the change in historical moment. Worth continues to use *A Mouthful of Birds* in her teaching, leading to new choreographic engagements – and so to new engagements with *The Bacchae*. In March 2019, I watched a group of Worth's students present work that focused on Doreen's possession scene and final lines, staging through dance the way Doreen inherits violence from male aggressors and returns this upon those who oppress her in the dismemberment of Pentheus; watching this short sequence influenced the reading of *A Mouthful of Birds* I have given here. Thus the gaps in the archive that on the one hand frustrate thoroughly integrating pieces such as *A Mouthful of Birds* into the performance history of *The Bacchae* provide, on the other, opportunities for theatre-makers to be creative and for scholars to trace a genealogy of feminist engagement with Euripides' play. This genealogy can, in turn, illuminate its sources (both *The Bacchae* and *A Mouthful of Birds*).

Later productions of *A Mouthful of Birds* demonstrate changing feminisms in the years since the original staging – both the ideas that emerge from the piece but also those that come to bear on it in new contexts. The intersection between feminist and queer politics that the piece indexes has become more prominent as that intersection continues to be explored. A production

of *A Mouthful of Birds* I worked on at King's College London in 2016 made this apparent to me: director and choreographer Marcus Bell was drawn to the piece, at least in part, because of its queer potential to trouble binary gender (Bell). I recall one of the performers playing Dionysus, Rosa Whicker – a very active presence in the college's queer scene – objecting to the use of the term hermaphrodite in the Barbin passage, suggesting it was an outdated and now somewhat offensive term. Whicker's observation helpfully points to some of the limitations of *A Mouthful of Birds*, as well as *Rites* before it. *Rites*' Aristotelian form provides an economy of representation that fails to resolve the critique of essentialism it attempts. Although I do not agree with Hersh's assessment that *Rites* affirms gender essentialism in the materiality of the body, the mimetic structures leave the critique of essentialism implicit rather than overt. Furthermore, while *Rites* opens up the homogenised group of Theban maenads in Euripides' play to imagine a range of working-class women of different generations, it does not address race – all of the women in the original cast were white. While it might be possible to cast women of colour in these roles in future productions, the fact remains that in the original production the play sought to make a point about the kinds of bodies not admitted into women's space but unintentionally underscored the absence of women of colour in those spaces in the 1960s.

Although *A Mouthful of Birds* does specify at least one woman of colour in its re-imagining of the maenads, it has also been criticised for its limited attempt to address race.<sup>57</sup> Evan argues that while Churchill professed an interest in countering gender stereotypes, the piece does not effectively counter racist stereotypes: 'The play does expose them by revealing the

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<sup>57</sup> While the original production featured two women of colour, Dona Croll and Vivienne Rochester, playing Marcia and Yvonne respectively, Marcia is the only main character to have her race specified by the text. On the page, Yvonne's possession scenario does not seem to involve issues of race. It is perhaps for this reason that discussions of race in the play have tended to focus on Marcia and omit Yvonne.

prejudices of the white characters in Marcia's scenes, but Marcia's post-possession monologue does not show her challenging or problematizing these racist views and proving them wrong' (277). Marcia ends up as the 'most victimized' of the four women in the play, more so than Doreen, but this goes unaddressed (277). Diamond also picks up on this in relation to a wider trend in white women writers ignoring issues of race: 'the foregrounding of gender inequalities in texts by women dramatists does not perforce include, and may not even imply, an awareness of racism's violence' ('Closing No Gaps' 172). Ultimately, as Evan suggests, *A Mouthful of Birds* 'fails to develop a theatrical vocabulary that subverts a racist ideology' (280). This is all the more striking given the extent to which the piece's many creators worked to craft a theatrically sophisticated way of subverting gender.

The fact that Worth's work with *A Mouthful of Birds* and the King's College London production in 2016 both take place in educational institutions points to the way that the piece thrives in experimental contexts that facilitate an extended process of interpretation and an audience trained to decode avant-garde performance practice. The original production struggled because it did not have such an audience. The piece's elaborate and experimental approach left it perhaps *too* ambiguous, as if it were written in a language that the audience could not comprehend. As Aston puts it,

It is doubtful whether from an audience's and critic's point of view the 'purpose' of *A Mouthful of Birds* was entirely clear ... [in] 'getting away from words' [Churchill] posed a difficulty for the British playgoer, educated in a tradition of text-based theatre, but unable to 'read' the physical language of the stage out of which *A Mouthful of Birds* takes its shape (86)



In particular, reviews of the original production suggest that many audience members seemed to miss a key part of the piece's re-visioning – the women remaining on the mountain – thereby undermining the intended message. For example, Jim Hiley of *The Listener* wrote,

you'd be well advised to turn up early at the Court and invest in one of their ever-helpful programme-cum-scripts. In the introductory notes, for instance, the authors tell us that their Agave, unlike Euripides', refuses to be civilised at the conclusion, sticking to her new-found ways, part Dionysian, part feminist. Without the advance notice, you could be forgiven for missing the textual distinction.

Oliver Taplin in the *Times Educational Supplement* makes a similar observation – he too read the script and found that in performance the women's decision to stay 'did not make a memorable impression.' Other reviewers, such as Alex Renton in *The Independent*, concur. More still suggested that the piece was difficult to understand without having read the text beforehand (Shulman, de Jongh). Given the piece's attempt to explode the spoken word as privileged conveyor of meaning, there is a certain irony that those who read the printed text were those that picked up on the alteration to the Euripidean narrative most acutely, and that even enthusiastic reviewers made sense of the production only after recourse to Churchill and Lan's words.

Babbage notes that some reviewers found *A Mouthful of Birds* difficult because of its diffuse range of narratives, of which *The Bacchae* was only one – faced with feminist fragments, they longed for patriarchal wholeness (102). Taplin's assessment that the piece's trouble is a 'lack of form' and a failure to represent the 'fundamental spatial division of city and wild mountain in Euripides' suggests this longing for the wholeness of the Aristotelian form to which Duffy stuck more closely. Similarly, Hiley writes that 'the fragments of the patchwork are stitched together

so cryptically ... that the atmosphere keeps growing too arty-crafty for the show's own good.'

*The Morning Star* praised the piece as a 'richly provocative dramatic collage' even as it acknowledged that many audience members were unlikely to understand the classical references and decode the mix of 'naturalistic' scenes and dance work (Parsons). The most negative reviews focused particularly on the lack of 'wholeness' and the non-traditional writing process – for the reviewer of *Punch*, the piece had 'about as much to do with *The Bacchae* as my Uncle George,' describing it as an 'arrogant exercise in glib theatrics and contempt for the customer.' Similarly, *The Sunday Telegraph* critiqued the piece as 'experimentally incoherent,' finding the 'seven jumbled episodes' to be 'so cumulatively bizarre as to make one leave in a state of incredulous exasperation.' So while feminist theatre scholars quickly noted the piece's daringly experimental significance, praising its attempts to deconstruct gender and representation, these same qualities made it obfuscating for some members of the press; often those that enjoyed (or at least appreciated) what they saw seemed to need the written text as a guide. One of the few sequences that seemed to consistently capture reviewers' imaginations was Paul's dance with the pig, a sequence between two men; another irony when considering the piece as feminist theatre.<sup>58</sup>

While *Rites* did not face such hermeneutic difficulties as *A Mouthful of Birds*, it was limited by its brevity and its containment within larger institutions. So even though Hersh argues that at the end of *Rites* 'the audience is left both with an intensified sensitivity to the depth of the gender divide and with an increased awareness of the continuing need for collective

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<sup>58</sup> Michael Coveney, reviewing the Royal Court run in *The Financial Times*, refers to the 'already famous pig ballet.' Reviews in *City Limits*, *Hampstead & Highgate Express*, *Herald Tribune* and *The Independent* all single out the pig sequence for comment or praise (Woddis, Watson, Cushman, Renton). The reviews in *Time Out* and *The Times* ran with large pictures of Paul and the Pig dancing (Edwardes, Wardle). The attention paid to Paul and the pig in a piece also largely about women seems a typical response from an androcentric mainstream culture.

resistance' (422), Babbage observes that the play's political urgency was contained by the carnivalesque frame of the 'Ladies' Night' at which it was originally presented. As Babbage writes,

[Ladies' Night was] a label implying precisely that sense of special favour conferred by authoritative powers rather than commitment towards a permanent inclusion ... *Ladies' Night* could be read as a prearranged, celebratory and strictly time-limited departure from the norm. The event was inherently a feminist act, not in the plays' direct promotion of an ideological stance but by seizing space for women's creativity. After the festivities, what if anything had changed? (100-101)

Babbage does point out that *Rites* seems to signal this contained subversion within its own theatrical world: 'subversive behaviours are explored within a female 'special space', and with devastating consequences, but ultimately the women return to routine, their insurrectionary impulses ostensibly exorcised' (101). The framing device of men constructing the women's space acts as a meta-theatrical acknowledgement of Ladies' Night as a concept. Babbage therefore concludes that 'in content and context, *Rites* questions how far "fringe" activity can impinge on the centres of power' (ibid.).

This movement from margins to the mainstream – for feminism, and for feminist engagement with *The Bacchae* – is the subject of the next chapter, in which a series of twenty-first century practitioners take readings similar to those made by *Rites* and *A Mouthful of Birds* and integrate them into productions framed as 'being' Euripides' play rather than adaptations of it. Instead of being one-off special events, these productions were staged for extended runs at producing houses with national profiles. Most importantly, while *Rites* and *A Mouthful of Birds* were the products of and responses to second wave feminism, the productions in the next chapter were produced in what has been described as the 'postfeminist' era. The threads of

feminist and queer interpretation continue, especially via the figures of Agave and her fellow maenads, but in the transition from avant-garde to mainstream, these ideas undergo their own transformations.

### CHAPTER 3 Postfeminist Maenads

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, *The Bacchae* has been performed in Britain with intense frequency. Theatre-makers of all kinds – those working in high profile theatre institutions as well as those on the fringe – have ensured that the play has rarely been off the stage in the UK for longer than a year or two since 2000. The Actors of Dionysus, a long-running but small-scale theatre company specialising in ancient drama, toured a production that year; this was followed by a major production by the National Theatre of Great Britain in 2002, which was directed by Peter Hall and toured to Epidavros in Greece.<sup>59</sup> Productions with national profiles followed, by Kneehigh Theatre Company (2004-2005), the National Theatre of Scotland (2008; this production transferred to New York), Manchester Royal Exchange (2010), Northampton Royal & Derngate (2012), Shakespeare's Globe (2013), and the Almeida Theatre, London (2015). There have been many more productions with smaller profiles. I discuss some of the latter fringe work in the next chapter; here I am interested in the way that theatre venues or companies whose work is received at the national level have engaged with *The Bacchae* and its representations of women. This is because something curious seems to have happened as the play regained popularity in the twenty-first century: the many avant-garde adaptations of the long 1970s, which teased out or overlaid concerns about gender and sexuality, have had their readings taken into the mainstream. Almost all the productions above have found *The Bacchae* to be a canonical text 'about' gender and sexuality in some way, even if amidst broader

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<sup>59</sup> For a detailed (if a little sycophantic) account of Hall's production, see Croall.

concerns.<sup>60</sup> For some, this preoccupation has followed the *Dionysus in 69* model and ignored or objectified women.<sup>61</sup> For others, however, the influence of decades of feminist presence in British culture – resulting in an epistemology that values women and the narratives in which they have agency – manifested in productions that sought to understand *The Bacchae* on feminist terms as a play about or greatly concerned with women. In this chapter I take three of these productions – by Kneehigh, Northampton Royal & Derngate, and the Almeida – as case studies. As I shall demonstrate, the strategies employed to enact a women-centric understanding of the play have both feminist and anti-feminist dimensions. This, I suggest, can be most productively characterised as postfeminist.

Postfeminism is a divisive term with a diverse range of meanings. It is that divisiveness and diversity that makes it an appropriate lens through which to understand how productions of *The Bacchae* have involved women and produced representations of women in the twenty-first century UK. The term's use here is neither an endorsement nor a condemnation, but an attempt to conceptualise what I see as significant characteristics of the play's most recent performance history. Of course, postfeminism exists amongst a range of different understandings of feminism in the last thirty years, including both third and fourth wave feminism. Postfeminism and third wave feminism emerged around the same time and have often been discussed as competitors or alternatives.<sup>62</sup> The competition between the two terms was particularly prevalent in the 1990s, when both were increasingly the subject of scholarly discussion. For example, Lesley Heywood

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<sup>60</sup> Hall's production, for example, was caught up in the post-9/11 moment into which it premiered. The one production that had less interest in gender was Braham Murray's for the Manchester Royal Exchange in 2010.

<sup>61</sup> See Bullen, 'Missing Maenads and Queer Kings.'

<sup>62</sup> See Gamble for a succinct explanation of postfeminism's origins as a term (44); Ann Brooks goes into more detail (2-5). Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie, and Rebecca Munford discuss the origins of third wave feminism in the introduction to their edited volume *Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration* (xxii-xxiv).

and Jennifer Drake begin the introduction of their highly influential volume *Third Wave Agenda* by addressing the significance of distinguishing between third wave and postfeminism 'in the perpetual battle of representation and definitional clout' (1); Sarah Gamble's explanatory essay in *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism* titles a section 'Postfeminism or Third Wave?' (51). For the purposes of this chapter, postfeminism is more pertinent for a number of reasons.

Firstly, the productions I discuss here are *post* feminist in the sense they are subsequent to – and influenced by – second wave feminist activism, thought, and theatre. They are neither explicitly concerned with third or fourth wave feminism, nor can they be unproblematically said to belong to these branches of feminist activism and thought. All of the productions I discuss in this chapter cohere the feminist aspects of their engagement around contradictions in ideas about female liberation or discontinuities of women's lived experience as both a liberated and oppressed subject in the modern world. These are common features of both third wave and postfeminist theorising.<sup>63</sup> But conceptualising these productions' relationship to women as postfeminist has the advantage of connoting ideas influenced by, but outside of, feminist discourses as well as invoking the nature of the theatre-makers' particular strategies.

Nevertheless, given the complexities surrounding the term 'postfeminism,' I begin this chapter by exploring its differing valences and critical usefulness in more detail, particularly in relation to Greek tragedy in modern performance. I then go on to examine some facets of *The Bacchae* in a postfeminist moment that are revealed by my case studies. As I shall demonstrate, the trends

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<sup>63</sup> Compare Gamble's comments on third wave feminists' 'ease with contradiction' (52) with Brooks' discussion of the way postfeminism intersects with postmodernism, poststructuralism, and postcolonialism in order to account for a complex array of differences (4).

across these productions exemplify the relationship between women, feminism, and *The Bacchae* in Britain during the last two decades.

## Postfeminism and Greek Tragedy

The fraught nature of postfeminism as a term is a result of its semantic ambiguities: it signifies on multiple levels. There is no consensus on the parameters of these significations nor on their exact number. Reference works such as Nancy McHugh's *Feminist Philosophies A-Z* (n.p.) and *The Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology* (456) note two significations each but differ in the specifics. In 2013, Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff noted four main significations:

1. The idea that feminism is a thing of the past, has done its work, and is now defunct (Gill and Scharf 3). This is perhaps its most dominant signification outside of academia, often perpetuated in tabloid journalism and informal online discourse.
2. A major change in feminist epistemology, akin to third wave feminism (Gill and Scharf 3). This in particular involves negotiating intersections with postmodernism, poststructuralism, and postcolonialism (Brooks 4).
3. A concept denoting the 'backlash' against feminism arising from the perception that gender equality has been achieved and/or that feminists go too far in their demands (Gill and Scharf 3). This is connected to 1, above.
4. A sensibility characterising culture, particularly popular culture, that 'emphasises the contradictory nature of postfeminist discourses and the entanglement of both feminist and anti-feminist themes within them' (Gill 149).

This range of significations, connoting both hostile and friendly attitudes towards feminism, understandably renders postfeminism suspect to many feminists – scholars or otherwise. Yet



this range means it invariably has a complex status as a legacy of second wave feminism, and both parallel to and the antithesis of third wave feminism. Moreover, as Nicola Rivers has argued, in its meaning as a sensibility it also characterises fourth wave feminism (4). Therefore, in its capacity to both connect with 'waves' of feminist activism as well as evoke something of the journey feminism has undergone from the late 1980s to the present, it provides an instructive umbrella term for the period under discussion. In this chapter, I find the second and fourth significations of postfeminism most helpful. In terms of feminist epistemology, the productions are all sites in which feminist ideas are mediated by other ways of thinking about the world – postmodernism, certainly, but also environmentalism, anti-capitalism, and, most significantly, queer attention to gender and sexuality.

As for the fourth signification, Gill's notion of postfeminism as a sensibility is particularly evocative in the context of Greek tragedy's recent performance record in the UK. As the second decade of the twenty-first century has progressed, theatre-makers have increasingly turned to the corpus of Greek tragic texts, with major revivals at high-profile theatres and intense interest from fringe and student theatre-makers. Emblematic of this resurgence in popularity was the decision by the Almeida Theatre in London to programme an entire season of Greek tragedies in 2015, with a festival of celebratory satellite events alongside the main productions (including staged readings of Aristophanes and marathon readings of Homer by a plethora of celebrity performers). The first play in the season, Robert Icke's reimagining of *The Oresteia*, transferred to the West End for a month. *The Bacchae* was instrumental in bringing the season about: director James Macdonald's proposal to stage the play with Ben Whishaw in the lead prompted Almeida artistic director Rupert Goold to programme the entire season (Edwards, interview), reflecting something of the popularity *The Bacchae* has enjoyed more

widely in the twenty-first century. *The Oresteia*, *The Bacchae*, and the third play in the Almeida season, *Medea*, all have violently disruptive women at their centre, even if – tellingly, as I discuss below – Whishaw’s Dionysus was more prominent than Agave or the chorus of maenads in that production’s publicity. The prevailing interest in Greek tragedy on the recent British stage may in part be a result of this foregrounding of women: these plays have been (re)discovered as canonical drama that offers visceral roles for celebrity actresses, fulfilling many high profile theatres’ need to stage the canon for the sake of ticket sales and cultural capital while also pursuing more progressive programming.<sup>64</sup> The Almeida’s three choices have been particularly popular, as have Sophocles’ *Antigone* and *Electra*. It is perhaps no coincidence that this period has also seen a revival of interest in feminist activism in British culture more widely.<sup>65</sup>

While Steve Wilmer notes that, despite the criticisms of second wave feminism, Greek tragedy has received extensive attention from women directors, writers, and performers, the extent to which this interest could be described as feminist – third wave, fourth wave, or post – is debatable.<sup>66</sup> There is a connection between renewed interests in feminism and in Greek

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<sup>64</sup> Among the major names to have taken roles in a Greek tragedy in recent years are Kristin Scott Thomas (*Electra*, Old Vic, 2014), Jodie Whittaker (*Antigone*, National Theatre, 2012), Helen McCrory (*Medea*, National Theatre, 2014), Juliette Binoche (*Antigone*, Barbican, 2015), and Kate Fleetwood (*Medea*, Almeida, 2015). The fact that many major theatres feel that they have dual imperatives to stage the canon and platform more women is a source of ongoing tension, as demonstrated by an outraged open letter sent by theatre-makers to the National Theatre in response to its announcement of a 2019 season that featured no plays written by women and only one production directed by a woman (Wertenbaker, et al). The National’s artistic director Rufus Norris and chief executive Lisa Burger retorted that they had ‘a duty to stage plays from the canon’ and, in any case, were casting lots of women (a production of Churchill’s *Top Girls* had just opened; see Snow, ‘National Theatre responds...’). This is a broader manifestation of a postfeminist sensibility in British theatre.

<sup>65</sup> A resurgence in feminist interest underpins Rivers’ *Postfeminism(s) and the Arrival of the Fourth Wave*, published in 2017; Rivers references scholarship that was already discussing the resurgence as underway in 2014 and earlier (1). Going back further, popular culture characters such as Buffy the Vampire Slayer discussed in feminist terms – as part of, or perhaps preludes to, this resurgence – in Gillis, Howie, and Munford’s *Third Wave Feminism* render the entirety of the new millennium as characterised by a feminist resurgence.

<sup>66</sup> See Wilmer (2007).

tragedy's popularity on stage, but this is as much the result of the shifting status of women in the twenty-first century Western world as it is of on-going feminist interest in the Greek tragic canon. There has been a tendency for contemporary discourse to make implicit or explicit claims that these plays (and their authors) can themselves be characterised as feminist, in so far as their dramaturgical and representational preoccupations correlate with contemporary feminism; this is the clearest manifestation of a postfeminist sensibility. The anxieties around the term postfeminism – its semantic potential to imply a condition of being beyond the need for explicitly women-centric activism – correspond with the precariousness of claiming ancient Greek texts as being inherently pro-women or articulating feminist positions. The acknowledgement of the substantial and active female parts characteristic of many extant tragedies seems to rest on a feminist epistemology that values representations of women that resist or disrupt patriarchal systems. Nevertheless, claims that these representations are somehow explicitly feminist creations must contend with contradictions and qualifications arising from the material and cultural context in which the plays emerged.

I want to look at two examples that demonstrate this in practice. The first is a co-production of Aeschylus' *Suppliant Women* between the National Theatre of Scotland and the Actors Touring Company, written by David Greig and directed by Ramin Gray, which toured multiple venues in the UK before coming to the Young Vic in London in autumn 2017. When it had started its tour in 2016 the production was geared towards a re-thinking of the Mediterranean migrant crisis, as the main publicity image of migrants on a distinctly modern raft made clear. Shortly before the Young Vic run, however, news broke about the prolific allegations of sexual misconduct against film producer Harvey Weinstein, beginning the on-going #MeToo campaign. The production situated its chorus of twenty-seven women of diverse

backgrounds, ages, and races at its centre; the chorus' fully sung and danced appeals for protection against sexual violence and for their own sexual autonomy were unsurprisingly received in the context of Weinstein and #MeToo. Susannah Clapp wrote in the *Guardian*, for example, that '[g]iven the events of recent weeks, this now appears incontestably as a play about women in the power of, and sexually oppressed by, men.' It subsequently emerged that historic allegations of sexual misconduct had been made against Gray himself (Masso, 'Director Ramin Gray...'); these were later upheld (Masso, 'Ramin Gray issued...'). It was also an acknowledged fact that the women of the chorus – the show's undeniable stars – were all unpaid volunteers. The production may be read as feminist in its message and in its centring of a large number of diverse women, but these contextual factors contradict that reading. As Maddy Costa wrote for *Exeunt*: '[a]s collective endeavour, as act of community, in so many ways the text of *The Suppliant Women* is perfect. But the context disrupts that, undermines it. It's discombobulating to hear these women who are seeking to escape rape cast their pleas up to Zeus, the mythological figure who did most to deify rape.' The dissonance between text and context fits Gill's description of a postfeminist sensibility, the 'entanglement of both feminist and anti-feminist themes' (149).

The back cover of the printed text of Greig's translation of *The Suppliant Women* cites a *Guardian* review declaring that the play proves Aeschylus to be 'the father of feminist protest.' This is a position that many feminists – including myself – would dispute, and it is not difficult to see why there may be an objection to positioning the two and half thousand-year-old male author of *The Oresteia* as a feminist forefather. Such a claim not only erases the work of far more recent women and men who are the actual forebears of feminist protest, but moreover also renders invisible the contemporary ideologies that have helped to make Aeschylus' play

intelligible as feminist as well as the problematic aspects of its originating context. This is the precarious feminism of Greek tragedy in a postfeminist sensibility: ancient texts cited as pro-women despite the complications arising from that notion. Costa goes on to write, 'I find myself wondering why it is that we must build cultural sympathy for the plight of modern refugees upon an ancient story about women threatened with rape, and what it means to generate empathy through that threat.' Conceptualising such receptions of Greek tragedy as postfeminist helps to make sense of the contradictory ideas that this framing entails, laying the foundations to begin answering Costa's questions.

My second example, *The Lightning Child*, in many ways exemplifies the possibilities of *The Bacchae* produced under a postfeminist sensibility. Produced at Shakespeare's Globe in 2013, *The Lightning Child* was the creation of Ché Walker and Arthur Darvill, with the former providing text and the latter music in the manner of book/score seen in musical theatre. In fact it was billed as the Globe's first musical, a 'psychedelic, anarchic remix of *The Bacchae*' in which '[h]istory, sex, funk, gender schism, politics, repression, addiction, envy, tragedy, and more sex collide' ('The Lightning Child'). The huge range of topics listed in this publicity material accurately indicate Walker's freewheeling approach to adapting Euripides' play. Alongside the ancient narrative were a number of what Walker described as 'satellite' scenes, two of which formed their own parallel narratives ('Perspectives' interview). In this way, he was following the precedent set by Churchill and Lan in *A Mouthful of Birds* – Walker had directed a production at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts in 2006, and, after discussing the piece with both Churchill and Lan, found in their work a freedom to 'fuck with' *The Bacchae* (personal interview). *A Mouthful of Birds* is perhaps partially responsible for Walker's understanding that 'Euripides wrote a very feminist play' ('A Gracious...' interview), but there are also longer term

influences: in a public interview at the Globe, Walker talked about the impact of being raised in the 1970s by his 'diehard feminist' mother ('Perspectives' interview).<sup>67</sup> *The Lightning Child* thus has its roots in the feminist past, both in the influence of *A Mouthful of Birds* and Walker's upbringing – as a result, for Walker his play was 'a very pro-women piece' (ibid.).

Even so, Walker's distinct perception of *The Bacchae* and *The Lightning Child* as feminist is combined with a strand from the culture-text of Euripides' play: an aggressive vehemence that both *The Bacchae* and the Dionysiac more generally is fundamentally about sex. Walker made such assertions in his interview with me and publicly at the Globe, commenting that *The Bacchae* in performance needs to be 'dripping with sex' (personal interview) and that 'libido and sex is [sic] fundamental to the DNA of the play' ('Perspectives' interview). That this view was shared more widely in the rehearsal room is indicated by assistant director Samuel Wood's comment that '*The Bacchae* is about hard dicks and wet fannies' (Wood, interview). These comments, as well as the aesthetic and politics of *The Lightning Child* as text and in production, recall the long 1970s' (mis)conception that the Dionysiac is primarily libidinal in nature that is exemplified by *Dionysus in 69*. Walker's fusion of feminist and anti-feminist readings of *The Bacchae* demonstrates the postfeminist sensibility at work in *The Lightning Child*, which had serious implications for the piece's representation of women.

In our interview, Walker commented that he has always been aware of the 'paucity of writing for women,' particularly working class and BAME women, and that he consciously attempts to address this in his writing (personal interview). In *The Lightning Child* this was predominantly made manifest through one of the parallel narratives, which is centred on the

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<sup>67</sup> When I asked Walker about this in our interview, he said, 'growing up with a mother who was really pushing for all that stuff – gay rights and women's rights ... you just imbibe it, it's not something I have to think about, it's just part of my consciousness and my unconsciousness' (personal interview).

ultimately violent tensions between two women living in contemporary London. It also impacted Agave and her relationship with Pentheus: as the narrative from *The Bacchae* progresses, it becomes clear that Pentheus has a sexual obsession with his mother (Walker and Darvill 35, 36). The encounter between the disguised Pentheus, Agave, and the other Theban maenads is staged rather than reported, with the murder prefaced by an exchange between mother and son. Agave slips back and forth from seeing Pentheus as her son to seeing him as a lion. This spills over into Agave's frustration at her son: when Pentheus claims that his 'skin's burning and bout to buss open,' Agave replies, 'so's my skin. For a long time now' (52). Finally, the exchange reaches its peak:

PENTHEUS. Do you love me?

AGAVE. Love a Lion. No. Love a son. With yellow eyes Lion wants to eat his mum and shit her out and feed her to dung beetles once he's done thass the job of a son, thass what sons do to us, you any idea what iss like to mother a Lion?

PENTHEUS. I'm a lion.

AGAVE. I'm a mother.

PENTHEUS. Did you want a kid?

*Agave is silent.* (ibid.)

Walker's reframing of Agave's previously off-stage encounter with Pentheus on Cithaeron becomes a means of understanding Agave's own burning frustrations. These appear to stem from being the mother of a man who is virulently anti-women, implying that even if the *sparagmos* is enacted in a moment of frenzy, it is driven by deep-seated resentment at being silenced and replaced by a child she did not necessarily want. This is expanded following Pentheus' death: Walker replaces Euripides' scene between Cadmus and Agave with a long monologue for the latter in which she recounts meeting Pentheus' brutishly violent but

immensely charismatic father, being impregnated by him and somehow bringing Pentheus to term almost immediately, then witnessing the father's murder in the delivery room at the hands of a rival lover (52-54).

Walker's rewriting of Agave sought to flesh out her character, offering the audience a first-hand perspective on the violence she commits rather than mediating it through the voice of an anonymous messenger. Implying that the murder was as much a reaction to Pentheus' oppressive behaviour as it was to Dionysus' spell of madness grants Agave greater agency and complicates any simplistic moral judgement on her culpability for the act. It also works to undermine the misogynist associations between women and the irrational that underpin much of *The Bacchae*. Furthermore, replacing Euripides' scene of tragic realisation and suffering with a reflection on Agave's past transforms what is a moment of condemnation into a moment for the audience to learn more about this character. On the Globe stage, it was an opportunity for an actress to hold the expansive space and its audience in a tour de force performance, claiming cultural capital at a venue where such moments are usually reserved for male characters and actors.<sup>68</sup> Even so, the monologue's subject – an encounter with a predatory man/god that ends with a jealous woman enacting revenge – replicates rather than subverts misogynistic tropes of Greek myth, particularly as found in Semele's seduction by Zeus and Hera's subsequent revenge, a story which Agave's monologue seems to deliberately parallel.<sup>69</sup> Perhaps most alarmingly, Agave's frustrations with her son turn on Walker emphasising Pentheus as a virulent

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<sup>68</sup> Catriona Fallow has discussed the implications of *The Lightning Child* being staged at the Globe (254-261). If, as Fallow suggests, *The Lightning Child* is implicated by virtue of the space within the context of Shakespearean practice, then it is especially significant that Walker gives one of the longest monologues of the play to a female character played by a woman, a moment which serves as the emotional climax of the piece.

<sup>69</sup> In Agave's monologue, Pentheus' father is described as the 'Vision' (52). Although not explicit, it is implied that the 'Vision' may be Dionysus, Zeus, or otherwise divine; at least one reviewer understood Agave to be talking about Zeus (Gardner).



misogynist, providing the occasion during Pentheus' introductory scene for the king to indulge in a sexist rant: it begins '[w]omen want to enslave you. Women want to neuter you. Women will control your every waking breath if you allow them' and descends from there (Walker and Darvill 14-16). While the audience laughed at these stories during the performance I watched, it seems that here Walker gave space to heightened misogyny without going on to counter it effectively.<sup>70</sup>

The chorus did not fare as well as Agave when it came to being adapted from Euripides. As is the case with many productions in which Dionysus is played as sexually charismatic, the chorus were rendered as his (willing) sexual slaves. This impacted the way they were placed on stage, the choreography, the costumes, and the use of voice and movement, resulting in the reduction of the maenads to the stereotype of rock star groupie. As such, the shift in title from *The Bacchae* to *The Lightning Child* is instructive: the maenads are decentred, broadly functioning in the new play to support Dionysus. In his first entrance, the chorus act as cheerleaders, each holding up a giant letter to spell out his name (see Walker and Darvill 17). Later, they function as a device to invite Dionysus to recount his birth (21), rather than describing it themselves as in *The Bacchae* (l. 88-103). Pentheus' soldiers subsequently imprison them in on-stage dog cages ahead of their release as part of the divine miracles, after which they sing:

[Dionysus] fucks our world  
 Lighting [sic] Child set us free  
 Lightning Child set us free  
 Naked in the mountains

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<sup>70</sup> Lauren Mooney, writing for *Exeunt*, concurred: 'Pentheus has a lot of thoughts on women and he would like to tell you about them. You do get the impression that this is supposed to come with a level of irony or indicate that Pentheus is the villain of the piece, but his big diatribe about how women entrap their lovers is delivered early on, before his character has been established, so it exists in a vacuum. ... While the monologue itself isn't coherent enough to be properly offensive, it does feels [sic] deeply misguided.'

We run  
Dancing in the mountains  
Just to serve him (Walker and Darvill 33)

While the chorus of *The Bacchae* express a similar sentiment in the sense they serve their god, the sexualised language and emphasis on nudity suggest a particular kind of servitude.

Combined with the production's *mise en scène*, the performance provided no sense that either the Theban or Asian maenads (these groups are, broadly, collapsed into one in *The Lightning Child*) participate in Dionysiac rites purely for their own pleasure; rather they serve for the sexual pleasure of Dionysus. This certainly contrasts with the chorus of Asian maenads in *The Bacchae*: their odes suggest that their participation in the god's cult gives them great personal pleasure. Although the maenads' activities are dedicated to Dionysus, Euripides' articulation of the chorus' enjoyment seems to indicate that the god facilitates this pleasure, rather than demanding it for his own sexual gratification.<sup>71</sup> Thus the combined choices by the creative team of *The Lightning Child* – the reduction of the chorus' narrative role, the flattening of the Dionysiac experience to a paradigm of sexual servitude, the sexualised choreography, and the revealing costumes – functioned to undercut any progressive impulse to imagine the maenads as liberated women. Even so, Walker insisted to me that the women in the cast loved performing the play (interview).

It is worth mentioning that Walker did include a sequence that showcased maenadic experience. This sequence, however, was centred around the male soldier sent by Pentheus to arrest Dionysus and the maenads. This soldier, played by Colin Ryan, is an extrapolation of the

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<sup>71</sup> See, for example, the epode of the parodos, in which the chorus describe Dionysus leading their *thiasos*, coaxing them to sing his praises; this produces a euphoric feeling (l. 135-166). The beginning of the ode at line 862 also describes the pleasures of participating in Dionysiac rites.

servant character in *The Bacchae* who brings Pentheus the captured god but expresses regret at doing so (l. 434-450). After he releases the maenads from their cages, the chorus transform him into one of their number. The stage direction in the printed text states: '[the chorus] paint the soldier and put him in a dress, which he loves' (33). On stage, the sequence indexed multiple analogies for this transformation: a religious conversion, a makeover, and a parody of a striptease; the latter was predicated on the way Ryan comically played up the pleasure of being stripped almost naked by the women of the chorus. After this sequence, the soldier appeared consistently as one of the chorus' number. In this way, although Walker professed an interest in providing greater roles for women, the maenad the audience was allowed to become most familiar with was a man.

If Walker understands *The Bacchae* to be feminist, he also sees it as 'very queer!' ('Perspectives' interview). This interest in queerness is connected to Walker's interests in women; the inclusion of the soldier's transformation into a maenad is a product of those intersections. It was one of a number of choices Walker made to amplify the queer possibilities presented by *The Bacchae*: Teiresias was played by famous drag performer and a founder of the UK Gay Liberation Front Bette Bourne (a cast viewing of a documentary about Bourne's life was a 'turning point' of the rehearsal process); one of the satellite scenes featured athlete Caster Semenya being confronted by a doctor over her gender; and Walker invented a new character, the white, gay, Jamaican Ladyboy Herald, to preside over the play.<sup>72</sup> Walker's queer interests come from the same places as his feminist ones – his upbringing, certainly, but also *A Mouthful*

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<sup>72</sup> Walker discussed the importance of the Bourne documentary at the 'Perspectives' platform event. Semenya's inclusion in the play was inspired by a controversy at the 2009 World Championships, when Semenya had been subjected to gender testing following her victory in the women's 800 metres (Clarey). Walker's scene engaged in questions about acculturation of the body in the context of prevalent socio-cultural conceptions of binary sexual difference. It is worth noting that Semenya's career remains an ongoing subject of debate (see, for a fairly balanced summary of the issues, Ingle).

of *Birds*, which similarly explored what were then emerging as queer conceptions of sexuality and gender. Yet in *The Lightning Child*, these interests compete. Emblematic of this is the creation and realisation of the Ladyboy Herald and the soldier maenad: additional male bodies on stage, playing parts that fulfil some of the function of the chorus in *The Bacchae*, resulting in less to do for those women.

I do not think Walker is being disingenuous in his claiming of a feminist perspective and that the play is pro-women. In our interview, he mentioned writing a long rebuttal to Lyn Gardner's review specifically to refute the notion that the production was sexist.<sup>73</sup> The critical reception of the production was mostly negative, and Gardner's review was no exception, but she does not go so far as to describe it as sexist – rather, she remarks that '[the production] is oddly conventional in its gender politics.' Other reviews noted the 1970s influences in the production's music, content, and aesthetic; Natasha Tripney particularly described the chorus as evoking Foxy Cleopatra, the 'Blaxploitation' parody character played by Beyoncé Knowles in the 70s-set comedy *Austin Powers in Goldmember*. It is in this way that Gardner's comment can be contextualised: a recognition that in rooting his vision of *The Bacchae* in the culture of the 1970s, Walker invoked an outdated, popular culture idea of gendered liberation. It is therefore neither entirely accurate nor especially helpful to describe *The Lightning Child* as feminist or anti-feminist, but considering it through the lens of a postfeminist sensibility helps to pinpoint its contradictory politics.

*The Lightning Child* is a particularly fraught case that emblemizes *The Bacchae* under a postfeminist sensibility: earnest impulses from a male author resulting in a combination of feminist and anti-feminist performance elements, combined with the competing influence of

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<sup>73</sup> He did not mention whether he published this and, if he did, I have been unable to locate it.

queer interest. While the critical reception of *The Lightning Child* repeatedly insisted on judging it, often negatively, in comparison to Euripides – as if Walker and Darvill's play were a poor substitute for the original Greek play – it was intended, by Walker at least, as less a representation of the original and more of a response ('Perspectives' interview). Needless to say, many of the idiosyncratic elements of *The Lightning Child* might easily be explained away by its status as an adaptation. What happens, however, when similar issues arise in contexts where the production in question claims to 'be' *The Bacchae*, a representation of Euripides' play, even if – as was the case with Greig and Gray's *The Suppliant Women* – adaptive choices have been made? The three case studies that follow explore exactly that, pinpointing how their representations of women draw on Euripides and on pro-women ideals but are nevertheless shaped by their postfeminist moment. While they have aspects in common with each other and with *The Lightning Child*, they prove individually instructive as further examples of elements touched on by the latter, namely greater focus on Agave, a re-imagining of the chorus and its 'wildness,' and the intersection of feminist and queer concerns.

### **Agave the Tragic Heroine: Kneehigh Theatre Company (2004-2005)**

The first production I will explore is Kneehigh Theatre Company's, which opened in 2004. Like many Kneehigh productions, it toured the UK extensively, performing at venues including the Hall for Cornwall, the Bristol Old Vic, Salisbury Playhouse, West Yorkshire Playhouse, the Lyric Theatre in Hammersmith, and the Liverpool Playhouse. As such, it was likely the most widely encountered production of *The Bacchae* for UK audiences for several decades.<sup>74</sup> Its position

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<sup>74</sup> According to the APGRD database, the last national tour of *The Bacchae* by a company with Kneehigh's profile was Nancy Meckler's production for Shared Experience in 1988. The Actors of Dionysus toured a production around the turn of the millennium, but they neither appeared in major regional venues nor

within the oeuvre of Kneehigh has also contributed to its legacy in the theatre-making world and amongst theatre students: Carl Grose and Anna Maria Murphy's text was published in a collection of Kneehigh adaptations in 2005, and because Kneehigh have, at least since 2013, been studied as practitioners on drama GCSE and A-level courses in the UK, the text continues to circulate.<sup>75</sup>

While scholarly attention has been paid to Kneehigh's idiosyncratic creative process (Lilley), their contribution to Cornish theatre (Kent) and British theatre more widely (Radosavljevic, 'Kneehigh'), and their work on Shakespeare (Wayne), there has been limited interest in their production of *The Bacchae*. Helen Eastman briefly discusses Kneehigh's centring of the chorus in their practice, referencing *The Bacchae* in the process (369-370), and Heather Lilley mentions *The Bacchae* briefly in discussion of Kneehigh's process (8, 14). The most extended critical engagement is from Núria Casado-Gual, who considers Kneehigh's *The Bacchae* alongside Sarah Ruhl's *Eurydice* as an example of what she calls 'postmodern Dionysian dramaturgies' (75-77). As Casado-Gual highlights, Kneehigh's engagement with the play asks significant questions about the relationship between Dionysus and marginalised identities, focusing in particular on the vectors of age, race, and gender (73-75). If postmodernism is one intersection with feminism that is embraced by the concept of postfeminism (Brooks 14-16), then I wish here to build on Casado-Gual's analysis to consider what Kneehigh's production had to say about women, as well as exploring how they said it, with particular focus on Agave. It is worth noting as I proceed, however, that of the productions discussed in this chapter,

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achieved a similar level of national press attention. The last major production of *The Bacchae* prior to Kneehigh was Peter Hall's for the National Theatre of Great Britain in 2002.

<sup>75</sup> Kneehigh's production of *The Bacchae* appeared at a critical moment for the company, when they were beginning to regularly achieve national attention. See Lyn Gardner's *Guardian* article from July 2004, shortly before *The Bacchae* premiered, which led with the strapline 'everyone from the National Theatre to the Bristol Old Vic wants to work with Kneehigh. Why?' ("We like our plays to be foolish").

Kneehigh's is the only one I did not see in person. I have also been unable to locate a complete video recording. I therefore approach my analysis of the production via reviews, audience testimonies, and video clips.<sup>76</sup>

Kneehigh's approach to theatre-making may be one of the reasons that their production of *The Bacchae* has received comparatively little scholarly attention, particularly from those coming from a background in classics. Much like *A Mouthful of Birds* and Caryl Churchill, those that have discussed Kneehigh's *The Bacchae* have done so in the contexts of the company's working methods or historical development rather than as an act of classical reception. Casado-Gual's work is a major exception here, but her article does not situate Kneehigh's interpretation of *The Bacchae* within the performance history of Euripides' play. Despite being performed with the Greek title, the production utilises what Casado-Gual describes as anti-Aristotelian strategies, which

make the Dionysian myth manifest itself as a form of theatrical storytelling which is more akin to the mechanisms of the unconscious. Despite the continuities that these techniques present with older theatrical forms, they endow the text and its performance with a dynamic, almost unstable quality that is still recognized as a sign of (post)modernity. (72)

For some, this created a signficatory paradox. That Kneehigh presented the myth dramatized by Euripides under a title primarily associated with that dramatic version, but significantly departed from the dramaturgy of Euripides' play, led to a jarring effect for those viewing the performance as a representation of what they understood to be *The Bacchae*. As Lilley has

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<sup>76</sup> The only video footage of the production kept in the Kneehigh archive at Falmouth University is fifteen minutes of 'highlights,' probably created for marketing purposes. I am grateful, nevertheless, for them sharing this and other material with me. I have also found a helpful resource in Jenni Whittaker's Dramaworks resource pack for schools, which gives an eyewitness account of the production (9-10).

suggested in relationship to their *Cymbeline*, Kneehigh's work often encounters such misconceptions because they '[ignore] fidelity discourses' (9).<sup>77</sup> Elizabeth Stewart's detailed review for the classics-oriented journal *Didaskalia* is revealing in this sense. Stewart writes that '[d]espite the promising premise of such a highly acclaimed company turning their hand to Euripides' masterpiece, the production suffers from too many stylistic and artistic lapses in judgement.' As Stewart subsequently proceeds to describe how 'the production smacked of Kneehigh throughout,' it is clear that for her, these are the 'many stylistic and artistic lapses in judgement' working against 'Euripides' masterpiece,' despite the occasional praise she offers them. Stewart is a theatre-maker rather than a classicist, but her audience in *Didaskalia* is predominantly the latter. Perhaps this particular kind of response, couched within an example of fidelity discourse Kneehigh care very little about, offers a possibility as to why Kneehigh's production has been separated from scholarship on *The Bacchae*. As I intend to show, however, the company's approach to theatre-making also facilitated the gender politics in their engagement with Euripides' play.

In her chapter on Kneehigh's work under the co-artistic directorship of Emma Rice and Mike Shepherd between 1999 and 2011, Lilley points to the way that both 'Rice and Shepherd have aligned their work with a folkloric, oral tradition of reshaping stories and making them relevant for new generations' (6). The 'intrinsic multivocality' of this tradition complements the company's 'collaborative approach of shared authorship' in which the entire creative team, including performers, are 'tasked with exploring their own personal relationship to the material and their collective consciousness of it within contemporary culture' (ibid). This process is instrumental to their reading of *The Bacchae*, circumventing as it does the hierarchical model of

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<sup>77</sup> Lilley's assessment draws on Radosavljevic's analysis of press reviews for *Cymbeline* (*Theatre-Making*).



source-translator/writer-director found in almost all other mainstream productions of *The Bacchae* that have taken place in twenty-first century Britain (including the other productions discussed in this chapter). In filtering *The Bacchae* through a diverse range of creative minds, the production can be situated as part of a genealogy that includes *A Mouthful of Birds* and Shared Experience's production rather than the much more prominent National Theatre versions of 1974 and 2002. That is to say, it departs from a male-led performance tradition that understands *The Bacchae* to be a play about universal themes as conveyed through the clash of Pentheus and Dionysus. As Casado-Gual argues, Kneehigh's production still treats universal themes (75), but conveys them, as Stewart's classics-oriented lens detects, by '[placing] the main focus on Dionysus' revenge on Agave,' rendering the latter 'the tragic heroine of the play.' Kneehigh's production is the first mainstream UK reception of *The Bacchae* under that title to pursue such a reading. Without wishing to make an essentialist assertion, I contend that this radical innovation in the play's performance tradition is linked to a creative process that allows women a voice.

Three women in particular were a key part of the creative constellation that produced Kneehigh's production. Emma Rice is credited as director, choreographer and adaptor; Anna Maria Murphy co-wrote the text with Carl Grose; and Éva Magyar both acted as co-choreographer with Rice and played Agave. As Lilley discusses, Kneehigh's 'process begins with explorations of personally inflected retellings and a keen interest is taken in how stories might change to reflect differing perspectives and differing contexts' (9). That Rice saw *The Bacchae* as a story that resonated with her as a woman is clear from her programme note, which is worth quoting at length:

I've always been 'good'. So has my sister. So have my mother and her mother before her.

But if we were snapped in half like human sticks of rock, would we have 'good' written through the spine of us? I know in my heart not - lying next to patience would be wild abandon, next to kindness defiance, next to understanding anger. Maybe not in equal measure - but there they are, threatening to rise up, to bubble through.

And thank the gods, the fates, the luck of the draw that those darker parts can largely stay where they are! ... But what if we weren't so lucky? What if we were born somewhere else or at a different time? Do we know that we would never lose control? Never dance 'til our feet bled, never march into the next village and kill our neighbour?

'The Bacchae' tells the story of this battle between the wild and the tame. The elation of breaking the rules and the terrible price to pay. It implicates us all and asks the question - what would you do?

Women. Being good is only part of the story. (n.p.)

There is no doubt an element of creative license at work here that is predicated on Rice's professional persona as a mischievous iconoclast.<sup>78</sup> Even so, the note points to the way in which a sense of gender-inflected societal expectations frames her understanding of the thematic debate at the centre of the play. In this way, Rice claims the universality of this canonical text – it tells the story of the battle between the 'wild and the tame,' implicating 'us all' – but achieves it with reference to female experience rather than through the male clash between Dionysus and Pentheus. In her suggestion that for women 'being good is only part of the story,' Rice positions Kneehigh's engagement with *The Bacchae* in the same vein as *A Mouthful of Birds*, which was

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<sup>78</sup> This persona grew concurrently with Kneehigh as the company achieved international success through the first decade of the twenty-first century (see Catherine Trenchfield's recent work for discussion of this journey at length). Rice's status as an iconoclast came most prominently to the fore after she left Kneehigh, however, to become the artistic director of Shakespeare's Globe in 2016. Prior to her first season opening, Rice's public comments about Shakespeare caused controversy, framing subsequent debates over her 'disrespectful' use of the space that led to her resignation eight months after her appointment (Morrison; see also Rice's interview with Kellaway). Her persona has continued to inform publicity around her new company Wise Children (see, for example, Malvern, as well as interviews with Kellaway and Lukowski).

partially motivated by Churchill's desire to resist essentialist ideas about women as inherently peaceful. Rice foregrounds the significance of women being 'bad' as the idea on which the play turns, but this turn to badness is understood neither as an external act of possession nor as an unexplainable irrationality – rather it is understood as an aspect of complex female selfhood brought to the surface in this myth. Referring to *The Bacchae*, Rice has said it was her job to 'reveal, not to conceal' (qtd. in Lilley 14); what is significant is that, to borrow Lilley's phrase, Rice's 'revealing and simplifying' of Euripides makes visible the critical role played by women in the play (14).

As Stewart highlights, this foregrounding of women resulted in a focus on Agave. The overarching narrative became about Agave's seduction, betrayal, and punishment by Dionysus. This is established subtly. The play begins with the chorus of maenads breaking into the Theban palace – in the first scene, a wild party is imagined as taking place just off-stage on the streets outside the palace. Following this, Agave is the first main character to enter – she 'looks out of the window' and 'dances gently' (Grose and Murphy 71). Cadmus and Teiresias then enter; Agave helps Cadmus into his wheelchair before exiting. Agave says nothing in this first appearance, but her actions are significant. She not only indicates that she has a hidden desire to join the revelry outside the palace, but her silent interaction with Cadmus places her in the role of his carer. This prefaces the subsequent arrival of Pentheus – in contrast to Agave, when he goes to the window, he declares that 'this behaviour will not be tolerated' (72). Agave then returns to the stage with a suitcase, signalling an attempt to leave for the party. Pentheus responds by asking:

Mother, what are you doing?  
Why are you dressed like that?  
Mother, I forbid you to leave!

Are you out of your mind?

[...]

What about your health? Your headaches! Mother! (ibid.)

Agave then leaves and Scene 1 ends with Pentheus brooding at his desk after shouting at the others in the palace. In this way, Pentheus' fury is framed as being intensified by the humiliation of his mother's conversion. Furthermore, the scene juxtaposes the image of Agave's desire to join the maenads with another in which she is a carer for her infirm father and subject to Pentheus' evidently controlling behaviour; Pentheus implies that Agave has been unwell (or is thought by Pentheus to be unwell). In this way, Kneehigh offer the audience an answer to Pentheus' unanswered question – Agave is not out of her mind, but rather in the process of escaping her oppressive, unhealthy domestic situation.

Subsequent scenes underscore Agave's journey to join the maenads as emancipatory. In Scene 3, Agave arrives in the forest where Dionysus and the maenads are ensconced, barely able to express herself:

AGAVE. I was wrong - I need to... I want -

DIONYSUS. Sshhhh...

AGAVE. I have left my home -

DIONYSUS. Sssshhh...

AGAVE. My son, he doesn't believe -

DIONYSUS. Sssshhh... This way. Come this way, Agave. (Grose and Murphy 81)

The chorus then remove the trappings of Agave's life as a privileged woman in the Theban palace – her suitcase, jacket, sunglasses, and headscarf – before Dionysus lifts her and the chorus 'manipulates and transports her' (ibid.). This sequence is preserved on video in the Kneehigh archive at Falmouth University: it is a tenderly performed set of actions in which Agave is

relieved of her restrictive clothing, danced with, turned upside down, laid down, and then lifted back up again to walk over a cascading path of chorus members' backs. The gentle sweetness of the movements in Agave, Dionysus, and the chorus' performance suggests the moment is about Agave's tentative discovery of her own desires.

This is further reinforced when, after much stage time devoted to Pentheus, attention is turned back to Agave for a monologue in Scene 12. Now in a further state of undress, she declares that '[l]ike a snake I have shed / My daughter skin / My mother skin / My Queen skin' (112). She wonders whether she has been asleep all her life, because now her 'new skin tingles' and she feels empowered: 'I can see what cannot be seen. / No one is safe from what I know. / No one is safe from what I can do now. [...] I can do anything / And I will' (ibid.). Agave's words evoke several characters in *A Mouthful of Birds* after their Dionysiac possessions – Derek, whose transformed self feels like his skin 'used to wrap him up [but] now it lets the world in' (Churchill and Lan 52) and Lena, who acknowledges that power over life and death 'is what I like best in the world. The struggle is every day not to use it' (51). The experience of Kneehigh's Agave with the Dionysiac thus follows in the same vein: it enables her to be emancipated from the limiting 'skins' of social roles she has accrued by virtue of her birth as an elite woman, allowing her to stake a claim to a transcendent total lack of limits. In contrast with *A Mouthful of Birds*, however, where Derek and Lena reflect after the violence of their Dionysiac possession has ended, Kneehigh's Agave is on the brink of violence: in the second half of Scene 12, the disguised Pentheus enters the forest on his way to spy on the maenads. Yet this is part of Agave's emancipation, because in shedding her caregiving and protective roles of daughter, mother, and queen, Agave's claim to being unlimited in her potential includes a capacity for irrepressible

violence, something previously claimed by her son (who in Euripides' play is associated with his snake or dragon-born father Echion, most pronouncedly at l. 538-542).

In addition to liberation from social roles, another part of Agave's arc in Kneehigh's production is her sexual liberation. Already intimated in the movement sequence of Scene 3, in Scene 6 Agave discusses her relationship with Dionysus in terms of a budding love affair:

I think he loves me  
I do  
Did you see the way he looked at me?  
His eyes were only on me  
I could feel them, I really could  
The other night he touched me  
Yes  
He walked amongst us  
And his skin brushed against mine  
He did it deliberately, I know he did  
He sees through this skin  
To what I am underneath (Grose and Murphy 90-91)

Agave's social emancipation and her sexual liberation are connected – here Agave suggests that Dionysus sees through her skin; by Scene 12, discussed above, she has shed those skins (physically as well as metaphorically, in the sense she is in her underwear). Her urge to be free from oppressive social conditions is thus bound up with the realisation of her sexual desires: both are part of the wants and needs that in Scene 3 she cannot yet articulate but that lead her to Dionysus all the same. Perhaps unsurprisingly this culminates in Scene 13 in what the printed text euphemistically describes as 'Dionysus and Agave party[ing] in the shadows' while the disguised Pentheus watches 'a Bacchic orgy' (114). Archival video footage and reviews both confirm that Dionysus and Agave simulate sexual intercourse and other sex acts in this moment (Stewart; Whittaker 10). When Agave encounters Pentheus seconds later, she is 'topless, wearing a red tutu and is covered in blood' (Grose and Murphy 115). The fulfilment of her 'romance'

with Dionysus – and thus the climax of her burgeoning sexual desires – coincides with a moment in which Agave is at her most naked and her most violent, a stark contrast from where she began the play. At this point of no return, Agave proceeds to participate in Pentheus' murder. In this way, Kneehigh include sex as part of the Dionysiac, but unlike *The Lightning Child*, this is framed from a female perspective as part of a wider journey of self-realisation.

Agave's pleasure may be emphasised in Kneehigh's staging, but the company make the audience aware from an early stage that Agave is being manipulated by Dionysus as part of his revenge. The chorus' re-enactment of the mythic backstory leading up to the events of *The Bacchae* emphasises Agave's culpability in denying Dionysus's divinity (Grose and Murphy 79). At the end of this sequence, just prior to Agave's arrival in the forest, the god tells his followers (and the audience) that '[t]he trap is set, I have thrown the net / And I almost have her – Agave – she's nearly mine' (80). Even in the scenes with Pentheus and Dionysus, the audience continues to be reminded that the overarching revenge is on Agave – after her arrival in the woods, she frames the action by remaining visible on an elevated platform at the back of the set. As hinted at in Scene 1, Pentheus was driven by an obsession with his mother: in Scene 5 his speculations as to her motives for leaving the palace lead to him dispatching both his female assistant to spy on the maenads and his soldiers to arrest Dionysus (88-89); in Scene 10, when his assistant returns, he questions her about Agave first and expresses surprise at the news his mother was naked (103). When Dionysus comes to disguise Pentheus as a woman in the following scene, his undressing reuses movements from Agave's moment of conversion. Then he is dressed in a manner visually reminiscent of Magyar's Agave – a curly auburn wig and sunglasses – so that on the Euripidean line 'you look like your mother,' the similarities are visually pointed for the audience (111; cf. *The Bacchae* l. 925-927). As such, Kneehigh manage to

stage Pentheus' death in a way that underscores its significance to Agave – the half-naked, bloody Magyar confronts a Pentheus dressed as Agave's pre-Dionysiac self, echoing the way in which the male actor in 405 BCE playing both characters may have, as Agave, meta-theatrically gazed at the mask of his previous character as a representation of Pentheus' head, symbolically doubling the punishment Dionysus has given mother and son. In Kneehigh's staging, therefore, Agave's role as principal recipient of Dionysus' wrath is underlined. In the process, the company imply that Agave murders not only her oppressive son but, on a symbolic level, her oppressed former self.

Agave's 'dance of death' with Pentheus is another of the scenes preserved on video in the Kneehigh archive.<sup>79</sup> The erratic sequence is ambiguous: it is unclear whether the tussling going on between Agave and Pentheus involves violent or sexual acts. Agave's exultation with head of her son is then marked by gendered triumph:

Kill or be killed!  
Look at what these woman's hands can do.  
I will skin this beast and wear its coat as a skirt  
[...]  
I, Agave, the King's mother killed it [the lion/Pentheus]  
The only thing I killed before is time!  
I will show him [Pentheus] what his mother can do now (Grose and Murphy 116)

In the subsequent recognition scene, Agave reels at her failure to recognise her son, which in turn is expressed as being a failure as a mother:

They say love is blind.  
Yes, that's it, I was blind,  
For a moment I was blind.  
[...]  
But even a blind woman would recognise her son

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<sup>79</sup> 'Dance of death' is the phrase used in the printed text (Grose and Murphy 115).



[...]

And now I cradle his head, but not like I once did.  
Not like a mother should. (117)

Even so, in the same speech Agave implies that she was aware of what she was doing on some level, 'I did hear his voice, although I thought it a lion's cry / but in my soul I heard it say: "Mother, it is I - your son Pentheus"' (ibid.).

This succession of sequences and images, which forces Agave to confront what she had surrendered in order to achieve her Dionysiac emancipation, enacts a collapse between her socially inscribed roles as a mother and caregiver (to both father and son) and the realisation of her previously repressed sexual self. In achieving the latter, she transgresses the former – resulting in immense shame and suffering. At the same time, her experience of oppression as a result of those socially inscribed roles informed, and heightened, the violent break with them. In the circuitous tragedy of this situation, Agave comes to embody those universal themes Rice found in *The Bacchae* – the 'battle between the wild and the tame' and '[t]he elation of breaking the rules and the terrible price to pay' are located in the suffering of this woman who is caught between personal pleasure and social duty. Dionysus' final, repeated taunt to Agave that 'it would have been better if you had never been born' (Grose and Murphy 120) expresses the paradox of her position as a woman in a patriarchal society, whose status as a mother demands she surrender her capacity for violence and desire for sexual pleasure. Agave's final retreat from the stage clasping her son's head is Kneehigh's final image – there are no concluding sentiments from the chorus – and in bookending the play with her, the company emphasise the fact that, in their retelling, *The Bacchae* is Agave's tragedy.

Kneehigh's production is also notable for their staging of the maenad chorus. As Eastman notes, the company's foregrounding of the chorus in their previous work with Rice provided them with a theatre-making vocabulary primed for Greek tragedy when they came to work on *The Bacchae* (369-70). While Agave's tragic arc became the axis on which the company's retelling of the myth turned, it is crucial to consider their presentation of the chorus when thinking about how the story was told. Lilley writes:

Rice's approach to the piece was to view the subject of femininity through the lens of a cross-gender chorus, all male performers with bare chests and tutus exploring why a grandmother, a teenager, and a menopausal woman might be tempted to leave society and seek excitement on the wild mountain. This chorus led the audience through the complex narrative of the Greek tragedy... (14)

This is very clear in the video highlights in the Kneehigh archive, which appear to have been cut together to showcase the unique qualities of the company's work: the chorus feature throughout. As Lilley suggests, there is no attempt to make these performers visually signify women beyond gendered costume pieces and gestures. Grose and Murphy's text attempts to earnestly account for what might be described as maenadic rationale – why a variety of women of different ages would feel sufficiently disenfranchised that they would find liberation in the Dionysiac. These include, as Lilley touches on, a grandmother who seeks the opportunity to transcend the socially prescribed behaviours for her age ('I tell you, I've worshipped some Gods in my time / But this one is the best for grandmothers! / So bugger knitting! Sod cakes! And up the arse of toothless food!' Grose and Murphy 76); a teenager who wants to revel in her burgeoning sexuality ('I am bursting out all over! / I am ready for my first kiss [...] Pain and pleasure at my leisure,' *ibid.*); and later a menopausal woman who finds relief and meaning in Dionysus ('But with him, I am not invisible' 106). Yet Kneehigh also introduce a new character, Pentheus' personal assistant

Pam, who articulates a more conservative position in support of her employer; she was played by a woman. How then was this deployment of gendered bodies and ideological positions intended to be received?

Casado-Gual describes the chorus' speeches as feminist and argues that by putting them in the mouths of the male bodied chorus, Kneehigh

underlines the construction of gender roles and sexual identity ... [t]hrough the ideological scope that all the female characters [including Pam] create, ranging from traditional and monolithic visions of femininity to radically liberated and plural positions, Kneehigh also subverts the classical association between the Bacchae and inexplicable madness and, consequently, between femininity and the irrational (74-75)

This allows the company to explore 'the elation of breaking the rules when [this] emerges from marginalizing and repressive contexts, as well as the possible radical actions to which perpetuated forms of oppression can lead' (75). This is certainly apparent in the rearticulation of Agave's narrative: the irrationality of her actions is undermined by situating them as resulting from patriarchal oppression. The chorus also express a similar sentiment. In direct contrast to Euripides, where Dionysus states he has driven the women mad (l. 32-34), the chorus leader says 'I didn't need to be persuaded / I didn't need to be lured' (Grose and Murphy 75). Later, in their song 'The Women of Thebes,' sung to Pam after she expresses horror at the violent actions of the Theban maenads (she broadly fulfils the same narrative function as the first messenger in Euripides), the chorus state that

The women of Thebes  
Each one was doing what they do  
Day in, day out  
Usually the whim of someone else  
Dreaming their quiet dreams

When they heard the call

They dropped their  
Soup and bread  
Kicked off their shoes instead  
Left their lovers, sheets and pillows

[...]

The women of Thebes  
Each one was dancing without a care  
Arms went one way  
And legs went another  
They danced a dance of love  
They danced a dance of despair

[...]

And once you've danced like that  
It's so hard to go back  
To the kitchen (105-106)

These lyrics may articulate a feminist position but in performance this was a group of, to borrow Eastman's term, 'burly men' speaking as women while addressing a woman – played by a woman – who has just expressed horror at the violent actions of the maenads (369). Again, how is this to be read in the wider context of a project that has a demonstrable investment in a women-centric reading of *The Bacchae*?

Perhaps it is meant to be read as a pointed observation about men who lecture women on feminism, or the supposed feminist efficacy of certain kinds of radical activism. This reading might follow a second wave position in the vein of Sue-Ellen Case, suggesting that in casting men as the female chorus, Kneehigh underscore the nature of the chorus as men in drag. This, however, would position all the chorus' statements, which resonate with Agave's story, as

heavily ironic, and might suggest that Agave's narrative of frustrated liberation has a tone of irony as well. It would also seem to counter the attempt to render the chorus with a diverse range of female experiences. At the same time, a reading closer to Casado-Gual's – that the chorus speeches are sincere in their feminist intent and the cross-casting serves to underline the construction of gender – is hard to reconcile with the performance itself, where the chorus were so visually reminiscent of Dionysus (also a tall, bald man) and so often acted as sinister enforcers of his will in their physical manipulations of Agave and Pentheus.

Considering the production in the context of postfeminism might indicate a possible way forward. Postfeminism aims to embrace contradiction as a feature within feminist discourse that seeks to deconstruct a monolithic female experience by offering a multiplicity of voices (Brooks 4). In this light Kneehigh's work on *The Bacchae* can be seen as an attempt to sincerely rethink maenadism from a diverse range of perspectives whilst playfully challenging the essentialism of the female body as the only viable articulator of feminist thought. At the same time, those male bodies serve to underscore the fact that the female-bodied Agave's Dionysiac liberation is bound to be marked by tragic contradictions. The production does not condemn Agave for what she does – the pleasures she received as part of the Dionysiac were legitimate – but accepts that there are terrible consequences. The female subject is thus found to be complex in its contradictions, rather than being monolithic in the way Rice evokes with the image of a stick of rock shot through with the word 'good'. This is presented both via Agave and the chorus. Such an understanding of the production's politics accounts for its origins as a refraction of *The Bacchae* through multiple creative minds, male and female.

Reading Kneehigh's production as postfeminist contextualises its representation of women and gender in relation to what Casado-Gual identifies as its postmodernism. This is

characterised by a dramaturgy that ‘invests the Euripidean tragedy with modern-day forms of signification that interact with ancient forms’ (71). The key is the way in which Kneehigh ‘disrupts the continuity of fictional time’ by introducing anachronistic props and references while refusing to disguise the Greek origins of the myth (72). The production is thus distinct from *The Lightning Child*, which attempts something similar but incorporates modern narratives. It is also distinct from productions that simply visually index modernity through *mise-en-scène*, or those that recontextualise the narrative wholly into a modern setting (I discuss examples of these below). This is important because it creates ‘formal and conceptual bridges’ between ancient myth and Kneehigh’s contemporary audiences (72). Agave’s 1950s style of costume, for example, ‘evokes a time in which most Western women were still trapped in the traditional roles and stereotypes generated by their patriarchal environments’; her transformation into a maenad ‘hence represents a radical step in her personal liberation’ (74). The production thus allowed the myth to resonate across multiple temporalities rather than situating it as taking place within a single discrete historical period – it is simultaneously ancient and modern. This brought *The Bacchae* into discussion with modern (post)feminist ideas in a way that embraces contradiction rather than pursue simplistic comparison. Most significantly, it suggested that Agave’s tragedy – the outcome of a cultural double bind in her roles as caregiver and as sexual subject – is as much a product of the twenty-first century as it is the ancient world.

### **Staging Wild Women: Northampton Royal & Derngate (2012)**

My next case study was produced by the Northampton Royal & Derngate Theatre in 2012. It followed a series of high-profile productions of *The Bacchae* – the most significant of which, at least in terms of the influence they had on the Royal & Derngate team, were the National

Theatre of Scotland's production in 2008 that toured internationally, and Kneehigh's. These were the two previous versions that the writer for the Northampton production, Rosanna Lowe, engaged with in preparing her text (Lowe, interview). Unsurprisingly there were some continuities with Kneehigh's retelling; I explore these below. In contrast to Kneehigh, however, this production of *The Bacchae* was generated by the kind of traditional institutional hierarchy the Cornish company seek to subvert: the text was written by Lowe alone following a commission by the theatre; it was directed by the Royal & Derngate's then artistic director, Laurie Sansom; and it was programmed as part of a season, which subjected it to various demands beyond the creative imperatives of the show itself. One such demand manifested in casting – the entire company also had roles in the second show of the season, Lorca's *Blood Wedding*. The third show in the season, Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*, was marketed alongside the other two, but not artistically connected aside from being directed by Sansom.<sup>80</sup>

This institutional frame is an important aspect to consider with the Northampton production. The season was dubbed the 'Festival of Chaos', and Dionysus – or, at least, the Dionysiac – provided the connecting rationale for programming the plays together. Ivy was a recurring visual motif in publicity for all three productions, while thematically Sansom argued that the plays 'continue to give up their secrets in thrilling flashes whilst maintaining their mystery, speaking of dark, buried impulses, and the Dionysiac at the heart of us all which we deny at our cost' ('Welcome'). Yet beyond the Dionysiac, the season was predicated on what Sansom called 'Wild Women'. This is itself instructive in indicating the kind of reading of *The Bacchae* that the production undertook – as part of the season, it was invested in paying close

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<sup>80</sup> Lowe did indicate to me, however, that the whole season was originally conceived as being artistically linked – at one point, Sansom was trying to cast all three together (interview).

attention to how all the plays, including Euripides' tragedy, represent women who resist male authority. Stuart Leeks' short essay on *The Bacchae* in the programme addresses this; there he writes that '[t]he play can be read as a fable of women being unshackled from domestic bonds to live wild and free outside of a patriarchal society' before going on to disavow this possibility, suggesting the idea that such a reading depends on ignoring 'that the Bacchantes are being manipulated and used by a male god ... for his own ends' ('The Stranger from the East'). Like Leeks, the Northampton production acknowledged both the potential for *The Bacchae* to operate as a 'feminist fable' and the limitations of such a reading. But there is an echo of Sansom and the Royal & Derngate's own approach to the maenads in this acknowledgement that the liberated women are manipulated for a male god's own ends. In the shared programme for *The Bacchae* and *Blood Wedding*, Sansom writes,

Are these wild women liberated or crazy and chaotic? Empowered or simply powerless to resist the most destructive impulses? Whatever we feel, the world would be a duller place without them - and those women, wise and wily, wilful and wonderful, will keep on dancing, following the beat of their blood, running riot and running wild. ('Wild Women')

The way Sansom others these women as entertainment for a universalising 'we' indicates how, despite investing time and money into staging plays with subversive women at their centre, their wildness risked becoming a fetishizing spectacle for mass consumption rather than a progressive exploration.

More generally the production can be characterised as the result of creative negotiation between Sansom, Lowe, and their respective preoccupations and allegiances. The pair first met while studying at Cambridge, and in 1992 took a student production of *The Bacchae* – written by Lowe and directed by Sansom – to the National Student Drama Festival. As might be



expected from a student production, this was more daring than the one presented in 2012: Lowe describes it as a pro-Dionysus 'intimate and interactive performance' in an octagonal space with women playing all the roles other than Pentheus (interview). Nevertheless, the experience stuck with Sansom, so when it came to putting together the season, he commissioned Lowe to write the text for *The Bacchae*, with their work together in the 1990s becoming the basis for this production. There were significant changes all the same, not least a shift of emphasis from Dionysus as a radical freedom fighter to an embodiment of the tensions he engenders (ibid.). In my interview with her in 2012, Lowe reported that there was

quite a lot of heated discussion about whether ours was a feminist production or not, amongst the cast. There was a little bit of tension between Laurie and I on that, because I would like to do a very feminist version, but I think Laurie's interest in it is more to do with gender ambiguity, the fluidity of sexuality and gender. So I think we came from slightly different angles (ibid.)

Here is another occasion in which feminist and queer perspectives came into conflict. Sansom and Lowe's relative positions of power on the project are also worth bearing in mind, with Sansom not only having authority as the production's director but as the director of the other shows in the season and as the artistic director of the Royal & Derngate, and Lowe as a freelance writer hired by Sansom for the project. That Lowe sought to articulate a feminist position in her adaptation and that this was mediated by Sansom's own politics is all the more significant, placing her in the position of being able to generate the text but otherwise to operate as an outsider to a process run by Sansom. As Lowe made clear in her discussions with me, however, this was not a simple dichotomy between feminist and anti-feminist individuals or ideas. My analysis thus attempts to untangle these elements while thinking through their origins in the creative process.

Like Kneehigh's production and *The Lightning Child*, the Northampton production sought to bring *The Bacchae* into a modern context. This was part of Sansom's brief to Lowe – he 'wanted it to feel contemporary and have a contemporary resonance,' contrasting with their student production, which had no specific location (Lowe, interview). In searching for an appropriate setting, both Lowe and Sansom 'wanted it to be in a society where there was an undertone of women being second class citizens' (ibid.). In Lowe's first draft the location remained ambiguous, but Sansom pushed for something definitive on the grounds that the creative team and the audience needed a specific referent for Thebes (ibid.). After discussing a number of options, eventually it was decided that the play should be set in a 'desert supercity' in the manner of contemporary Arab cities in countries such Saudi Arabia and Qatar (Lowe, *The Bacchae* 2); in the programme, Lowe specifically mentions the King Abdullah Economic City in Saudi Arabia as an example ('Cities from the Sand'). The rationale for this was to situate the narrative in a recognisable contemporary setting that facilitated a modern transposition of the play's themes and mythic political structures. According to Lowe, they looked to this kind of modern desert city as 'a place with very strict rules and a dynastic family, [which] seemed very pro-Western liberalism and capitalism but actually the underbelly of that was built on a lot of exploitation of labour and a lot of sexism and a lot of repressive laws against the common person, particularly women' (interview). It also served as a metaphor for a kind of hubris that imposes human civilisation in the midst of a wild environment hostile to human life.

Perhaps understandably, Lowe had reservations: 'there was a little bit of difficulty there, because I could see how a female uprising is absolutely pertinent to some of those countries, but at the same time I didn't want to write a play that seems a sort of ignorant Muslim bashing play' (interview). In the production, the desert city idea was ultimately distanced from an Arabic

context through the casting of white actors speaking with British accents as the Theban characters. The unusual space for the performance also had an impact – rather than stage it in any of the Royal & Derngate's regular theatre spaces, the team took over a former printing press designed to resemble a dingy underground car park. This represented 'the dirty Underbelly of Pentheus' palace. [...] the gurgling guts of the place, full of gases, smoke and smells, the bowels through which the wastage of the regime passes' (Lowe, *The Bacchae* 2). This space also contained the partially covered up tomb of Semele, which the palace has been designed to conceal (ibid.). References to the desert setting were thus predominantly textual (and as a result of Lowe's programme note, paratextual); the major exception is the first messenger's report, which was delivered by a pre-recorded video sequence in which a news correspondent reports from the oasis (the equivalent of Euripides' Cithaeron). It is important to point out here that Lowe and Sansom's choice of contemporary setting was designed, in part, to facilitate their gender politics; they had sought a situation in which their audiences would be able to understand – perhaps even sympathise with – maenadism as a rebellious response to gender oppression rather than simply madness. Although they ultimately pulled back from overt comparisons with Arab states, even their contemplation of this reveals an impulse to invite a British audience to take stock of their own sense of gender equality.

Lowe's characterisation of Agave also emerged from this desire to situate the narrative in a context where there is recognisable misogyny at work. In contrast to Kneehigh's production, in which Agave's embrace of the Dionysiac is situated as the result of her oppression by Pentheus, Lowe imagines Agave as not only complicit in, but actively encouraging, her son's anti-Dionysiac politics. This came from Sansom's desire to 'understand Agave a bit better and to see the relationship with her and Pentheus earlier on in the play,' which itself emerged from a

feeling that ‘there should be more fleshed out psychology [for her] than there is in the original’ (Lowe, interview). Sansom envisioned something akin to Coriolanus and Volumnia in Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*, a relationship in which Lowe interpreted the mother as being ‘the power behind the throne [...] there’s this odd, slightly incestuous mix of love and nurturing all at the same time’ (ibid.). Following this line of thinking, Lowe wanted Agave ‘to be a character who is a strong woman in herself and yet doesn’t tolerate the position of women changing, she actually wants it to be a patriarchal society, despite the fact she is a powerful and strong-minded woman herself’ (ibid.).

In a new scene between Pentheus and Agave prior to the latter’s spell of madness, the queen refers to the other Theban maenads as ‘silly girls’; when Pentheus wonders why the women have run away, Agave says that ‘women get all sorts of ridiculous fantasies into their heads’ (Lowe, *The Bacchae* 12). When Pentheus suggests she rule the city, she laughs, asserting that ‘Thebes needs a man’ (ibid.). Alongside Volumnia, other models for Lowe’s Agave were Angelina Jolie’s portrayal of Olympias, the mother of Alexander the Great, in Oliver Stone’s 2004 movie about the ruler, and Fiona Walker’s portrayal of Agrippina the Elder, Caligula’s mother, in the 1970s television series *I, Claudius* (Lowe, interview). Lowe’s Agave thus indexes the misogyny of elite women whose own privileged position causes them to replicate rather than challenge sexist ideas. This is achieved by constructing Agave as a recognisable trope character from representations in popular culture of historical figures. From Lowe’s perspective, this lent Agave the strength of personality and psychological complexity which she and Sansom were seeking. Making Agave complicit with Pentheus’ agenda – or, indeed, making her the power behind the throne – also underscored Dionysus’ revenge against them both, while emphasising their close bond allowed Agave’s final scene greater pathos.

The highlighting of Agave's privileged position reflects Lowe's attention to the socio-economic dimension of Thebes' Dionysiac revolution. Dionysus' revenge is consistently qualified in terms of anti-capitalist activist movements such as Occupy, in which the god's ecological qualities (wild nature reclaiming territory from urban civilisation) are made to correlate with a class- and gender-based whistle-blowing insurgency against an oppressive, hyper-capitalist regime. Although this is expressed in part by Dionysus and the Theban characters, it is most clearly visible in Lowe's drastic reimagining of the maenad chorus. Indeed, if the focus of Kneehigh's (post)feminist reading was Agave, then Lowe's focus is the chorus. They were a group of five women of different ages, races, and body shapes. Lowe fought for an all-female group of this size: she recalled to me in our interview how at one point in pre-production Sansom, for practical reasons based on casting both *The Bacchae* and *Blood Wedding* (as well as *Hedda Gabler* at this stage), considered including men in the chorus or else reducing their number. Lowe said:

It would actually have been very interesting in a different production but I felt quite passionate about it, partly from an actress's point of view, that there's [sic] these great roles in tragedy for women...women get such short changed on roles in so many plays and here's a play with great roles for women and men are doing them! (Interview)

This underlines the importance of the chorus' female identity to Lowe. It also indicates how important they were to Lowe's overall conception of *The Bacchae*, and how they provide 'great roles for women.'

Unlike many adaptations and productions of *The Bacchae*, including Kneehigh's and *The Lightning Child*, where the chorus of Asian maenads is often merged, knowingly or otherwise, with the Theban maenads – usually as a means to stage Pentheus' *sparagmos* – Lowe's

chorus draw their identity from their foreignness to Thebes. These maenads are not from Asia, however; they are not defined by geopolitical difference at all. Rather, Lowe and Sansom employ a device that, as with Kneehigh, disrupts the continuity of fictional time: ‘*The Bacchae*, his chorus of followers, are a collection of women from different time periods and cultures, all of whom have run to meet the call of the wild, in its various guises. Each echoes a female character from myth, stage, page or screen’ (Lowe, *The Bacchae* 1). Lowe explained to me that the idea – which she claims came from Sansom, though he attributes it to her – is that ‘Dionysus has passed through history and has inspired characters in plays and stories and has given birth to them, infusing them with the spirit of Dionysus’ (Lowe, interview). The five women chosen were: the Diva, Ibsen’s Hedda Gabler; the Bride, the runaway bride from *Blood Wedding*; the Hacker, ‘a punky, tattooed rebel’ inspired by Lisbeth Salander, the eponymous lead character from Stieg Larsson’s novel *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, which had received a high profile Hollywood adaptation in 2011; the (Dis)Possessed, ‘a liberated slave’ inspired by the historical ‘witch’ Tituba as well as Arthur Miller’s representation of her in *The Crucible*; and the Forsaken, Dionysus’ mythic wife Ariadne (Lowe, *The Bacchae* 1). In selecting these women as models for the chorus, the production replicated in microcosm the season’s project of bringing together ‘wild women’, expanding it to include figures from popular culture, myth, and history.

While Lowe suggested to me that audiences (or at least reviewers) did not especially respond to her reimagining of the chorus (interview), there are two important observations to make about what this decision reveals about feminist thinking and *The Bacchae* in the Northampton production. Firstly, the way Lowe writes the idea into her script makes a significant claim for what maenadism means in her version of the play. It encodes the maenads as subversive women whose idiosyncratic personalities interrupt the order of patriarchal culture

– they disturb the naturalness of androcentric epistemologies and rituals, responding to a socio-cultural system in which women are disenfranchised with violent resistance rather than submissive complicity. In this way, the maenads become aligned with strands of feminist activism, positing a genealogy for this kind of gendered resistance that stretches back throughout history to mythic time. This is demonstrated by the language with which Dionysus introduces the chorus:

My Bacchae will entertain you.  
You may know them already.  
My savage soul singers.  
They leap from the page and the stage and the scream  
And wander the landscape of your dreams.  
My monstrous regiment  
Of women  
Running riot  
Through the world  
With me. (Lowe, *The Bacchae* 6)

By suggesting their familiarity within culture, Lowe invites the audience to view their actions in the play through this lens. Thus their disruption of Pentheus' Theban state, which as I have suggested, also turns on ecological and anti-capitalist sentiment, is always pointedly an act of gendered resistance. For example, in their arrival sequence, the Hacker says, 'we will draw our shadow net around them and hunt them, hunt them down. / All you hunters and haters of women' – these 'hunters' are notionally the enemies of Dionysus, but in the Hacker's words they are explicitly encoded as misogynists (8). Later on, when the Head of Security (like Kneehigh's Pam, an extrapolation of a Euripidean messenger, this time the second one) threatens the chorus following Pentheus' death, suggesting there will be 'other men who will punish you,' one of the women replies, '[m]en have no power over me' (49). In this way, Lowe opens up maenadism from being a discrete phenomenon of ancient Greece based around ecstatic worship and situates

it as a transhistorical phenomenon that recurrently manifests throughout Western culture; Sansom's programme note on 'wild women' affirms this ('Wild Women'). As with Kneehigh's chorus, this device works to undermine the suggestion that maenads are simply maddened women, suggesting instead that the Dionysiac attracts women who do not fit within patriarchal structures, and that such women have existed from ancient Greece to the present.

My second observation is that this device enables Lowe to explore a diverse range of experiences within a collective identity. As with Kneehigh, the different maenads suggest different rationales for embracing the Dionysiac, relayed in short solos in their first two songs: freedom from colonial hegemony (Tituba/the Possessed, Lowe, *The Bacchae* 7); a desire for transcendence from the world through the sublime (Hedda Gabler/the Diva, *ibid.*); a sense of anti-establishment community and a channel for rage (Lisbeth Salander/the Hacker, 8); a reconnection with the world following heartbreak at the hands of a man (Ariadne/the Forsaken, 22); and escape from the monotony of married domesticity (the Bride, *ibid.*). In transposing these experiences from the specific to the archetypal, a move that acknowledges their fictionality, Lowe allows them to operate outside historical bounds. This is evident in a new scene which Lowe included and which stages Agave's transformation into a maenad. The chorus call out to her: 'We are creatures of inspiration / Idols and icons made fresh / We are phantoms and fantasies / Ghosts of possibilities / Fiction made flesh' (21-22). They then list the 'possibilities' they embody: the arsonist, the anarchist, the suicide, the cursed, the kissed, the sensualist, the hedonist, the runaway bride (22). As self-aware archetypal representations of women, they operate as inspirational avatars for a transhistoric subversive femaleness compiled from disparate aspects of culture – high art and popular culture, ancient myth and (early) modern history. In this way, as they suggest, they connect with numerous lives: 'we are viral,



contagion, / We've multiplied' (ibid.). In terms of the play, the maenads 'multiply' by transforming Agave into one of their number; in doing so, they initiate a character Lowe had already underpinned with an archetype – the overbearing mother of the man in power – into the maenads' collective identity. That this ends badly for Agave has ramifications for the whole chorus. Lowe was frustrated that in searching for 'iconic' figures to inspire their chorus, she and Sansom were only able to identify those that are 'constructions of men' (interview). But Lowe turned this to her advantage, intimating parallels between these male-created archetypes and the ambiguous empowerment of women under Dionysus. As I discuss below, this allowed Lowe to nuance her reading of the play's conclusion.

Before moving on to this conclusion, it is worth considering how Lowe's reimagining of the chorus as feminist-coded transhistorical archetypes functions as part of her adapted narrative. As I mentioned previously, the chorus function to contextualise the Dionysiac in contemporary radical activism. This informs their role in the play. Dionysus suggests that the chorus have joined him to 'do [his] wild work and bring this palace down' (Lowe, *The Bacchae* 6). They thus are first seen entering 'stealthily, from different spots in the darkness, trying to locate the birthplace of the God' (ibid.). They act like spies – they 'carry equipment to carry out their mission' (ibid.) and, upon entering, 'stealthily set upon the Security guard, rendering him unconscious, without seeing who his attackers are' (7). They proceed to uncover Semele's tomb and decorate it with flowers. These actions become the inciting incident for much that follows – Pentheus is lured down to this basement zone after being alerted to the incident with the knocked-out guard and the offerings to Semele. The chorus' activities lead Pentheus to call for the disguised Dionysus' arrest, thus starting him on the journey that leads to his death. The chorus continue to shape the narrative – they hack into the city's CCTV records in order to leak

footage of the brutalities of Pentheus' regime to the world, they carry Agave off to the desert to complete her transformation into a maenad, and they respond to Dionysus' arrest by rioting.

This last sequence evokes a succession of images of contemporary activism. They begin by singing a protest song, a 'provocation to revolution,' broadcasting it globally (28). This becomes a 'Dance of Destruction' in which '[t]hey stamp, shake or use sticks, kicks, fists to create havoc in the underbelly' (31). In response, a group of security forces (played by a community chorus of men) enter, and fight the maenads.<sup>81</sup> In performance, this was a high energy action set piece that slipped between dance and fight choreography. The maenads succumbed to their opponents, and the final image of this sequence, again invoking the contemporary world, was of the riot officers standing over the bloodied bodies of the barely conscious chorus members. Lowe's script suggests that the men attempt to rape the chorus (ibid.); if this was realized in performance, it was not clear to me (there is no mention of it in reviews either). That Lowe and Sansom give the women of the chorus such an active role in the narrative and contextualise it in relation to recognisable images of activism, protest, and rioting is significant – Lowe relieves the maenads from the formal functions of a Greek chorus and writes them as a character fully integrated into the plot. They thus simultaneously operate as contemporary activists and transhistorical archetypes.

Despite their radical actions, at the end of the play Lowe has the chorus express horror at the violence of Agave. This signals a sudden rupture for the women of the chorus. After Dionysus delivers his pronouncements *ex machina*, the chorus watch Agave and Cadmus leave, 'confused, as if woken from their trance state and reminded of their own humanity' (61). They

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<sup>81</sup> This second chorus was played by a group of students from the University of Northampton. The extent to which they were remunerated for their work on the production is unclear (they are simply thanked in the programme).

appeal to Dionysus, calling him in terms which signify their relationship to him – ‘my husband,’ ‘my lover,’ ‘my passion,’ ‘my fury,’ ‘my God’ – but the god rejects them: ‘who are you? / You are air. / You are nothing to me’ (ibid.). The final image of the chorus is of them ‘bewildered, disoriented [...] no longer a group, their faith in the God and the Stranger broken’ (ibid.). Disconnected from their collective identity as maenads through witnessing the appallingly violent conclusion of their radicalism, the chorus discover they were means to an end all along. That previously empowering identity is reaffirmed as the creation of a male power who has co-opted the women’s disenfranchised status to make use of their resulting rage and passion. The similarly male-created archetypes that animated them are shown to be as restrictive and prescriptive as they were once liberating. There is also a reminder that, like Agave, the women from myth, drama, and history that inspired their archetypes almost exclusively conclude their stories dead or in immense suffering. In Lowe’s script and in the performance itself, the weight of the tragedy thus falls on these abandoned women.

What is to be made of this conclusion? As previously mentioned, Lowe suggested there was ‘heated discussion’ about whether the production was ‘feminist or not’. Although Lowe suggested that the ambiguity of the male-created women that informed the chorus is cognate with the ambiguity of the Dionysiac as liberating for women, there was dissent amongst the cast about this, particularly in relation to Lisbeth Salander/the Hacker: ‘that actually caused one of the fiercest debates amongst the cast, because some actually felt that *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* was a very sexist book’ (Lowe, interview). Although Lowe does not agree that Larsson’s book is sexist, the comment helpfully raises the question of whether the production critiqued the representations of women it invoked, or whether it was simply complicit in the potential misogyny of these representations. From Lowe’s perspective, the project was ‘playing with ideas

of what is feminine' (ibid.). In our interview, she suggested that her biggest influence in writing the text was Jay Griffiths' book *The Wild*. Describing Griffiths as 'sort of a feminist and nature writer' and *The Wild* as a 'homage to the Dionysian,' it helped to hone Lowe's attention to conflicting ideas underwriting the cultural construction of womanness. Through engaging with Griffiths, who draws attention to deep-seated cultural associations between women and such things as changeability, madness, creativity, and riddling, Lowe identified that 'they are also the things that women want to disconnect from and say we're not hysterical, we're not easily manipulated or crazy, we're not all changeable, we're not all closer to nature than men' (ibid.). Lowe seems to be keen, therefore, to challenge existing representations of women, and her text may be read in that light – she situates at the play's centre a group of women whose allegiance to the Dionysiac is understood as arising from oppression, but whose willing embrace of prevailing archetypes to fight oppression is revealed as ultimately reductive.

There remain questions, nevertheless, about the extent to which the production realised this critique. Sansom was clearly invested in the idea of wild women as commercial vehicles for his season as much as an artistic area of exploration. His comments in the programme are revealing. He speaks of 'the excitement of trying to get inside plays that have provoked and thrilled audiences over and over' and says to the reader 'I hope you enjoy entering the chaotic, passionate and unforgiving world of Dionysus as much as we have enjoyed exploring it' ('Welcome'). While these kinds of comments are understandable from an artistic director for whom being overtly political is a risk, they suggest an approach that enshrines rather than challenges the canon, ultimately with the aim of claiming cultural capital for himself and his venue. Taken with Lowe's recollections of her clashes with Sansom, particularly over her feminist and environmentalist reading of *The Bacchae*, it seems that Sansom was not entirely

committed to fulfilling Lowe's vision in its entirety. As Lowe mentioned, she felt that few audience members intuited her politics (interview). Certainly this was the case with the production's largely positive reviews; the majority understood the production in terms of a thrillingly visceral spectacle, with most credit going to Sansom.<sup>82</sup>

It is in this way that I suggest Northampton's production may be characterised as postfeminist. Both Sansom and Lowe were guided by a feminist impulse to seek out and stage interesting, complex representations of women, and this is clear in many aspects of the production, from its programming as part of a season characterised by so-called 'wild women' through to the creative choices made in re-imagining the world of *The Bacchae* and its characters. This was also apparent in the range of parallel events put on at the Royal & Derngate as part of the season, including a talk from academic Amanda Potter on 'Dionysus, Violence and the Female in *The Bacchae* and Beyond' and a youth theatre production of Timberlake Wertenbaker's women-centric *The Love of the Nightingale*. That Sansom and Lowe took *The Bacchae* as a text in which women have a major stake is itself a result of a feminist epistemology that reads the canon while paying attention to women, contrasting with the many productions that favour Dionysus and Pentheus. In constructing their chorus, the pair invited audiences to understand maenadism as a kind of transhistorical female subversiveness encoded in feminist terms. In predicating this, however, on male-created representations that may or may not be complicit in sexist ideas, Sansom and Lowe introduced ambiguity as to how progressive their

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<sup>82</sup> For example, a review in the local newspaper *Leighton Buzzard Observer* aligned the spectacular enjoyment of the production with Sansom's own as director: 'Orgies, mayhem, violence? It's a director's dream' (Cox). Another local reviewer remarked that '[t]he play is certainly not one for the faint-hearted as it features male nudity and a gruesome scene involving a severed head' (Jones). Michael Billington wrote that '[l]ike all good productions of Euripides's play, this one leaves you shaken and stirred.' In his opening paragraph, he singles out Sansom for praise, claiming that the Festival of Chaos 'confirms he runs the most daring of regional theatres.' It should be noted that Sansom left the Royal & Derngate less than a year after *The Bacchae* to become artistic director of the National Theatre of Scotland.

reading was. Furthermore, even if he was committed to creating a pro-women production, Sansom was limited by the institutional context he was operating within. As some of the discourse around postfeminism indicates, 'feminist' is a highly politicised term that is not always seen as positive – it would be unusual for a major producing theatre to adopt this label, even if their intentions are progressive. But there is more to Sansom's reticence to embrace Lowe's feminist politics: his reading of the play as being about sexuality and gender ambiguity seems to have acted in competition with Lowe's desires for the project, and curtailed them. The contradictions between intentions and outcome, individual politics and institutional commitments, and differing emphases in exploring gender can all be understood as postfeminist. As with Kneehigh's production, this is ultimately a more helpful way of understanding this engagement with *The Bacchae* than seeing it as either feminist or anti-feminist. This also helps to conceptualise the gender politics of a production that, in contextualising *The Bacchae* explicitly in modernity, acknowledges and responds to existing notions of feminism within its audience.

### **Classic Drag Revisited: The Almeida (2015)**

The last production I will examine in this chapter is also the most recent at a UK theatre with a national profile, having premiered at the Almeida in London in 2015 as the second play in their season of Greek tragedy. In contrast to the other productions I have discussed, the Almeida took an approach tellingly described by Michael Billington as 'orthodox.' What precisely Billington means by this term in relation to *The Bacchae* is a little unclear, but in this instance it seems to refer to two key approaches: retaining much of Euripides' dramaturgy through a new translation by Anne Carson (tellingly titled in a more archaizing way as *Bakkhai*), and casting the

production according to 'ancient' practice, with three actors sharing the character roles and a large chorus singing and performing choreography throughout their odes.<sup>83</sup> This was driven by the man responsible for getting the production staged at the Almeida: James Macdonald, one of the foremost theatre directors in the UK, most notable for directing many premieres of plays by Sarah Kane and Caryl Churchill. He was assisted by Jessica Edwards, a young female director with explicit interest in women-centric work, and who here acts as a key witness to the production process. In my interview with Edwards, she suggested that Macdonald was inspired in his approach to the play by a production of it in ancient Greek which he had seen when at prep school aged eleven or twelve; he showed a video recording of the performance, in which all the parts were played by boys, to the cast (interview). Edwards suggested that Macdonald thus wanted to explore the creative possibilities of doing the play in a way that was, to use Edwards' term, 'puritanically Greek' (ibid.).

While this was notionally followed through in the approach to text, in casting the named characters, and in having a large chorus, there was a crucial deviation: women, not young men, were cast as the Bacchae. This led to a large number of women on stage: with ten actors, this was the biggest all-female chorus yet to be staged in a twenty-first century UK production of *The Bacchae*. Conversely, the role that in modern practice is usually given to a woman, Agave, was taken by a man – Bertie Carvel, who also played Pentheus. Macdonald was, according to Edwards, fascinated by the resonances of Pentheus and Agave being played by the

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<sup>83</sup> As I discussed in a paper for the APGRD's annual postgraduate symposium in 2018, the ambiguity around Billington's notion of orthodoxy is endemic across reviews for *The Bacchae* in twenty-first century Britain. This is because many critics, Billington especially, have very specific ideas of what Euripides' play is – or should be – and these often stem from the play's culture-text rather than a firm understanding of the text itself. In other words, critics' *impression* of *The Bacchae* based on Schechner-style long 1970s readings replaces the actualities of the text itself. This can result in a discrepancy in critical responses to productions that depart from that impression, as was the case with the Almeida's.

same actor, and felt the doubling fundamental to the play. Revealingly Edwards suggested that a certain reading of the play along these lines might find there to be no Agave at all, and that Pentheus simply returns to the stage in female costume; this may well have been a reading discussed by Macdonald in rehearsal. In any case, Edwards' suggestion aligns with Case's famous critique of Greek tragedy in her essay 'Classic Drag' – that the male-embodied, fictional 'Woman' of the Athenian stage is a work of male fantasy, distinct from the lived experiences of actual women. The unusual approach taken by the Almeida for their production of *The Bacchae* – casting three men as named male and female characters and ten women as the all-female chorus – revisits Case's central proposition but complicates it in ways that can be understood as the web of intersections and contradictions that is postfeminism.

Case never discusses *The Bacchae* in her essay, but the play, understood as the live-text of 405 BCE, seems to illustrate her findings. Euripides' dramaturgy carefully exploits the all-male performance conditions of ancient Athens in ways that may well have nuanced meaning for the original audience. It recognises and plays with the fictional 'Woman' while drawing attention to the absence of real women. Thus Agave is received in a dramaturgical context where mimesis is being made visible, with questions asked about the meaningful difference, in theatrical terms, between a man performing a woman-like man (Dionysus), men dressed as women signifying as women (the chorus, Agave), and a man dressed as a woman signifying only that, a man dressed as a woman (the disguised Pentheus). As Edwards indicates, Macdonald clearly had a similar conception of the play, but, in only partly adhering to Greek convention, ended up generating an economy of representation in which casting women as the chorus and a man as Agave emphasised gender in a way that made Agave a feminised aspect of Pentheus



rather than a character in her own right. When Carvel appeared as Agave, he was very visibly a male actor playing a woman, because he stood in contrast to the women of the chorus.

This was, then, the inverse of Kneehigh's approach: whereas in their production, the male-embodied women of the chorus contrasted with Agave, at the Almeida, it was Agave's male body that contrasted with the chorus. Moreover, this became an inverse of Kneehigh's claims about the central subject of the play. Far from it being Agave's story, the significance of Pentheus was reinforced because the audience were aware of Carvel's own presenting gender aligning with that first character. In other words, this was not an experiment in which virtuoso acting allowed performers to disappear into multiple roles regardless of gender; rather, Pentheus followed Carvel with him into Agave. Next to the women in the chorus, Carvel's Agave remained Pentheus in women's clothing. This is not to say that Carvel was not believable as Agave – several reviews praised Carvel's transformation – but under an economy of representation that does consistently align the genders of actor and character, as was the case with the chorus, Cadmus/first messenger, and Dionysus/Teiresias/second messenger, then a male actor playing Pentheus and Agave will invariably signify one as natural and the other as a construction.

The constructedness of Agave, and prevailing visibility of Carvel's own presenting gender throughout his performance, is clear from reviews of the production. Carson's translation has both Dionysus and Pentheus ask, at different moments, 'how do I look?' (*Bakkhai* 15, 48). For Pentheus, Dominic Cavendish's review provides a clear answer: "How do I look?" [Pentheus] asks, transformed — at which anyone who saw Carvel in *Matilda the Musical* may mutter: "A lot like Miss Trunchbull." This kind of comment is all but endemic to reviews of the Almeida production – of the eighteen reviews I examined, thirteen referenced

Trunchbull, the role Carvel played to critical claim in the RSC's musical adaptation of Roald Dahl's *Matilda*, first in Stratford-upon-Avon (2010), then the West End (2011), and finally on Broadway (2013). The Trunchbull references ranged from simple mentions (Wolf, Bellotti) to suggestions that the character was brought to mind in Carvel's performance as the disguised Pentheus (Collins, Dalton, Tripney) or as Agave (Coveney, Schafer) or both (Nice, Cox, Cavendish).<sup>84</sup> Some (Taylor, Billington, Clapp) suggested that Trunchbull was 'effaced' or 'banished' in Carvel's performance of Agave, with Clapp suggesting Carvel passed from 'impersonation to characterisation.' Even so, in naming Trunchbull in their critique of Carvel, these reviewers continue to couch Carvel's performance of gender in language that implies a theatrical act, someone playing a role, rather than a convincing embodiment. Furthermore, the show reports in the Almeida archive record numerous occasions in which Carvel's disguised Pentheus was received humorously, with audiences reading his dressing as a woman as comical. On at least two occasions the audience added to their laughter with applause: once for the 'entrance of Pentheus in drag' and once for 'Pentheus applying lipstick.' It is not clear from these reports how those audiences responded to Carvel's Agave, but taken alongside the overwhelmingly Trunchbull-oriented reviews, it is clear that Carvel's acting as a woman, regardless of whether he was to be understood as an actual woman, was very much on the minds of the spectators.

Playing opposite Carvel as Dionysus (as well as Teiresias and the second messenger) was Ben Whishaw. From the project's inception, Whishaw was conceived of as providing star appeal

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<sup>84</sup> Cavendish writes that the association between Carvel and Trunchball 'is alas reinforced when the actor crops up later as Pentheus' mother Agave, who has torn her offspring limb from limb in a ferocious fit of madness; he's about as convincing as a stag-do cross-dresser.' Nice and Cox's references to Trunchball are ambiguous – it is clear they were reading Carvel's performance via Trunchball, but it is unclear whether this was in regards to Pentheus in disguise or to Agave.

– it was, in fact, Macdonald's desire to direct *The Bacchae* with Whishaw in the lead that led the Almeida's artistic director Rupert Goold to programme the entire season of Greek plays (Edwards, interview). In 2015, Whishaw was a confirmed star of British stage and screen with broad appeal as a recent addition to the James Bond franchise in *Spectre* (2015) and the voice of Paddington Bear in a surprisingly successful new adaptation of Michael Bond's *Paddington* stories (2014). Many reviewers structured their response to the production around him; some noted that he added 'movie-star glamour' (Dalton) and that he was a 'likely draw for younger audiences' (Bellotti), while others outright enthused – Stephen Collins for *BritishTheatre.com* devotes his first five paragraphs to detailed descriptions of Whishaw's different characters in the production.<sup>85</sup>

Whishaw's attempt to play with gender had a very different outcome to Carvel's. Critics responded to Whishaw's posing of the 'how do I look?' question with zeal. Reviews described him as 'feline and flirtatious' (Hitchings), 'protean' (Wolf), 'pixie-like,' 'part Christ-figure, part Siren, part tempter/temptress, part cajoler, and all bewitching God' (Collins), 'a seductive, vengeful, sexually ambivalent god of pleasure' (Dalton), 'both epicene and sexy, softly spoken and menacing, fire and ice' (Nice), 'of indeterminate sex' (Cox), 'a gender-fluid, mercurial, definitely sexual presence' (Tripney), 'a beguiling erotic enticement as an effeminate and dangerous Dionysus' (Sadler), a 'delicate androgyny' (Taylor), 'half coquette, half cock of the walk,' and possessed of 'shape-shifting, gender-bending ambiguity' (Cavendish), having 'androgynous grace' (Billington), and as giving the 'most perfect portrayal of androgyny, helicoptering over all sexual horizons' (Clapp). Repeatedly Whishaw's performance was found

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<sup>85</sup> This enthusiasm was not disproportionate to the impact Whishaw had at the box office: he was likely a major factor on the production all but selling out its run of almost three months, and mostly before it opened. It is hard to prove this for certain, but Edwards seemed to think it was the case (interview).

to successfully elide distinctions between genders – he was epicene, gender-fluid, sexually ambivalent, androgynous, gender-bending, of indeterminate sex – or else to successfully combine genders – part tempter/temptress, half coquette/half cock of the walk; this seems to be connected to the language used by reviewers around fluidity more generally. Even when read as male, his performance was qualified with feminine-coded terminology – feline, pixie-like, effeminate.

The language of compositeness that runs through many of these comments is reflected in the tendency for reviewers' descriptions of Whishaw to fuse his Dionysus to cultural figures who successfully achieve gender fluidity as discrete, contained performances that transcend playing a role in a piece of theatre. Dalton's comment that 'Whishaw gives full vent to his inner drag queen as the seductive sensualist Dionysos, half androgynous rock star and half shape-shifting demon' is instructive in this sense, suggesting that Whishaw's god was rendered discernible through cultural forms independent of theatre. The specific figures Whishaw was compared to include Russell Brand, David Bowie, and Freddie Mercury, but the most frequent answer to Whishaw/Dionysus' question of 'how do I look?' was Conchita Wurst, the drag performer who won the 2014 Eurovision Song Contest. Seven different reviews compare Whishaw's Dionysus to Wurst. This was perhaps prevalent not only because Wurst's victory in Eurovision was still fairly recent, but because Whishaw's Dionysus was visually similar in costume, hair, and beard. Wurst and Whishaw's juxtaposition of these seemingly concrete gender signifiers reinforces them as corporeal provocations to reconcile gender contradiction in one body, defying the system of signification on which gender depends.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Chris Hay describes Wurst's performance in the 2014 Eurovision Song Contest as a combination of both 'imperfect maleness *and* imperfect femaleness' (emphasis original). This extends from the juxtaposition of hyper-masculine and hyper-feminine visual signifiers in Wurst's appearance to her

A comparison between the language used to describe Whishaw and Carvel's respective gender performances is revealing. When Dionysus asks 'how do I look?' he is seeking to pass as a human; when Pentheus asks, he is seeking to pass as a woman. As primary points of reference, Conchita Wurst and Trunchbull are both men in drag, but one is the persona of a committed LGBTQ+ figure that exists outside the theatre; the other is a comic performance, powered by the spectacle of gender travesty, that begins and ends in the theatre.<sup>87</sup> Whishaw's Dionysus thus signifies beyond a single text or a single performance, operating in a broader cultural sphere, as an identity or persona. In this way, Whishaw's performance seems to have succeeded in erasing gender in his combining of conflicting signifiers, done in such a way as to appear natural. In attempting to change gender, however, Carvel always remained marked as male, rendering Agave as a construction, a refraction of Pentheus.

No matter how the genders of Dionysus, Pentheus, and Agave were read by the Almeida's audiences, the attention paid to the production almost invariably centred on Carvel and Whishaw. This may have been predictable given the foregrounding of Whishaw in publicity for the production, but it nevertheless undermined the decision to cast such a large group of women as the eponymous chorus. Where they were mentioned in reviews, they proved to be divisive. While some saw the chorus as the 'heart' of Euripides' play (Dalton),<sup>88</sup> others considered them as digressions from what they saw as the real attraction: the 'core story' of

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choice of name: 'Conchita' is Spanish slang for vagina, while 'Wurst' is German for sausage (see Hay and Kanafani 71 n. 1). I am thankful to Hay for pointing these observations out to me.

<sup>87</sup> The biography on Conchita Wurst's website describes Wurst as a 'stage character' created by Austrian singer Thomas Neuwirth in 2011. But as well as recording music, Neuwirth and his character have a life in the 'real world,' using 'media attention to support sociopolitical causes.' This includes, among other activist causes, an appearance at a UN conference with the then Secretary-General Ban-Ki Moon.

<sup>88</sup> Dalton described them as the production's 'secret weapon,' going on to say that he 'could happily have dispensed with the dramatic scenes and watched a full concert by this sublime ensemble instead.' Further comments praising the chorus were made by Victoria Sadler (*Huffington Post*), Michael Coveney (*WhatsOnStage*), and Paul Taylor (*The Independent*).

Pentheus and Dionysus' conflict (Cox).<sup>89</sup> It is clear that some reviewers found the chorus challenging as a concept, with others reacting – positively and negatively – to how the chorus were presented in the production, a combination of Macdonald's direction, Antony McDonald's design, and Orlando Gough's music. Beneath the work of these three men, however, exists Anne Carson's work in translating the text from Greek to English. A close consideration of how Carson interpreted Euripides alongside other creatives' later contributions is necessary as a means of contextualising the production's unusual engagement with women and gender.

The chorus were clearly a special focus for Carson. Her translation received its premiere in the Almeida production, although she had been working on it prior to being contacted by Macdonald. The first choral ode appeared in the Spring 2013 issue of *Michigan Quarterly Review*, and Carson had been engaging with *The Bacchae* prior to that, writing a 'version of Euripides' *Bacchae*' called *Pinplay* that featured in the catalogue for an exhibition of *The Bacchae*-inspired work by artist Elliot Hundley at Ohio State University's Wexner Center for the Arts in 2011.<sup>90</sup> As Grace Zanotti has observed, *Pinplay* 'proceeds without Cadmus, Tiresias, and the messenger, and their many ruminations and explanations; and Pentheus and Dionysus disappear after a combined twelve lines.' Agave is the 'linchpin' of *Pinplay* in a way that redirects attention to the relationship between Agave and the chorus in *The Bacchae* (ibid.). Reading Carson's translation through her interventionary work in *Pinplay* – and the early publication of one of the odes – emphasises Carson's unique contribution to the play's performance history:

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<sup>89</sup> Cox suggested that the chorus 'interrupt[ed], dominat[ed] and overwhelm[ed] the acutely well-acted core story,' objecting to their imposing role in the production. Alex Bellotti for *Ham & High* similarly remarked that while Whishaw and Carvel 'shine,' the chorus 'prove a problem' with their 'interludes' often 'stalling the narrative.' Further comments criticising the chorus were made by Natasha Tripney (*The Stage*), Dominic Cavendish (*The Telegraph*), and Susannah Clapp (*The Guardian*).

<sup>90</sup> My thanks go to Grace Zanotti for introducing me to *Pinplay* and Hundley's exhibition.

reimagined material for the chorus that is rendered in a contemporary poetic idiom rather than literally translating Euripides' Greek. It also suggests that for Carson, Agave and the chorus have as great a stake in the 'core story' as Pentheus and Dionysus.

Perhaps the best example of Carson's special attention to the chorus is from her rendering of the parodos. Carson takes four short lines of Euripides (l. 105-8) and expands them into what Simon Perris calls 'a twenty-five-line tour de force' (The Gentle, Jealous God 159) in which the chorus call for Thebes to 'garland yourself / in all the green there is' (Carson, *Bakkhai* 16). 'More than thirty varieties of green burst forth,' writes Perris, 'it is an electric sequence'; it is symptomatic of her 'amplifying' method of translation that 'implies a wish to say more than translation proper will allow' (159, 160).

This amplifying approach is also reflected in Carson's attention to Agave. *Pinplay* makes a lacuna in the extant Euripidean text its central feature. Rather than focusing on the lacuna that would have featured Dionysus' speech *ex machina*, Carson looks at the gap in the text where Agave is supposed to have lamented while attempting to reconstruct Pentheus' body (l. 1300). Carson literalises the lacuna as an object that Agave tosses to the audience, as if – as Zanotti implies – to invite those reading to 'catch' the lacuna and fill it. But in her translation of *The Bacchae*, it is Carson that does the filling in, creating additional text for Agave's lacuna:

Ah.  
His body.  
His dear, dear body.  
This is my son.  
This is what I did.  
Come, old man, let us place the head and cover him  
and lay him properly in the grave.  
He deserves that.  
For I do not believe my son had any share in my folly. (*Bakkhai* 67)

Although the moment is brief, in allowing Agave to express suffering for the dismembered body of her son, acknowledge what she did, and attempt to assume the blame, Carson carefully redirects the focus of the play's tragic conclusion, shifting it from Pentheus to his mother. This aligns with Carson's attention to Agave in *Pinplay*, this time taking place within the framework of Euripides' play itself. In the Almeida production, this became the emotional climax of the piece, with Agave softly singing over the fragments of the body with the chorus humming back to her. It was an extended moment that, of all the sequences in the Almeida production, has left the deepest impression in my memory.

Macdonald's staging of the chorus and Agave worked both with and against Carson's choices in translation. The chorus first entered wearing ordinary contemporary clothing and carrying suitcases. During the parodos they opened these and dressed themselves in their Bacchic attire, fawn skins and ivy wreaths, a visual transformation that keyed into their call for Thebes to garland itself in so many shades of green. This clearly suggested a group of women on a journey, but moreover it situated them as ordinary, modern women who willingly participate in the Dionysiac cult rather than being coerced like the Thebans. Macdonald thereby undercut notions of the Dionysiac as archaic, emphasising it as something that attracts modern women from a range of backgrounds and ages. This is highlighted by the way in which some reviewers read the chorus as women on their way to (or coming back from) a festival.<sup>91</sup>

The sense of this journey is deepened through the performance, with the nature of the chorus changing once more. As Pentheus disguises himself inside the palace, the chorus also put on a costume: vibrantly coloured war paint that smeared across their faces and arms, signalling a

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<sup>91</sup> For example, Liz Schafer wrote, '[t]his ethnically and culturally diverse chorus arrives onstage looking as if they were at the WOMAD festival last month and hitched along the M4 before joining us in Islington.' Similarly, Paul Taylor suggested that the chorus 'start off looking like Glastonbury trippers.'



turn towards violence. Finally, at the end of the performance, the last word of Agave's closing speech – '[l]eave the thyrsos to the Bakkhai!' (Carson, *Bakkhai* 71) – was timed so that Carvel had just vanished out of sight and the chorus had assembled with their suitcases in the centre of the space, as if passing the baton of audience focus back to the title characters for them to conclude the story.<sup>92</sup> The group of women alone on stage, confronting the audience with their final lines, was the concluding image of the performance. On one level, therefore, the performance was framed as the chorus' journey as witnesses to and participants in the events of the play.

This can be contrasted with Edwards' account of the rehearsal process. Gough's incredibly complex score and the difficulties faced by the ten chorus members in mastering how to speak in perfect unison were challenges that, despite best intentions, the production team underestimated (interview). According to Edwards, it became impossible for the chorus to concentrate on 'anything other than the technicality' (ibid.). Furthermore, the chorus spent so long learning their material that they reportedly only joined the three male actors in the main rehearsal room in the last two weeks of the process, leaving them less than ten days to rehearse as a full cast. Edwards suggested that as a result, those in the chorus were deprived of 'agency in the rehearsal room' and 'robbed of investment as performers,' all the while playing the title roles in a situation that should have been 'interesting and empowering' for them as women (ibid.).

Edwards' description of how the lines spoken in unison were rehearsed provides an instructive example of this divestment of agency. Lines intended to be spoken in unison were

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<sup>92</sup> The timing of this moment left such an impression on me the first time I saw the production that when I came to view it again, I looked out for it – and it did indeed seem to be a deliberate choice rather than one-off serendipitous timing. Furthermore, it was repeated in the archival recording, seeming to confirm this reading.

assigned to an individual member of the chorus. The other members then learned the line in a manner similar to headphone verbatim theatre, copying the exact intonation of the original; once learned, this had to be repeated in exactly the same way for every performance. While on one level, this is clearly an effective realisation of Nietzsche's Dionysian dissolution of self into the collectivity of the chorus, on a practical level, it restricted the creative potential for each chorus member. Unlike the male actors, who were free to allow their delivery of the material to evolve over the course of rehearsals and subsequently vary from performance to performance, the women in the chorus had to stick to choices made – by themselves as individuals only one in every ten lines – early on throughout the long run. According to Edwards, it is hard to have agency when you are 'technically and physically homogenised' (ibid.). This reveals a stark contrast between the Almeida's approach and those adopted by Kneehigh and in Northampton, with the latter two emphasising individuality and difference within the chorus.

Edwards indicated to me some members of the chorus felt that individual female experiences were being homogenised. In Edwards' opinion, this is what ultimately happened in the production: 'it was tribalizing in a way that made it general rather than specific, which was problematic' (interview).<sup>93</sup> This was connected to another 'high level' source of frustration for the women in the cast – that, in giving Agave to Carvel, a 'brilliant female role was being played by a man,' which some felt was hypocritical (ibid.). Edwards herself felt that it was 'a very clear

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<sup>93</sup> Interestingly, Edwards reported that the women playing the chorus had an 'extraordinary bond' and that she has subsequently become very close to a few of them (interview). A testament to this (as well as to the physically demanding nature of the material) can be found in the show reports for the production: on two occasions a chorus member was too ill to perform, and the rest of the group 'covered magnificently.' On other occasions, some chorus members lost their voice and others had to sing their part. Towards the end of the run one chorus member performed the show on crutches.

example of, to put it in very, deliberately dichotomous terms, the female energy of the play being sacrificed on the altar of the academic' (ibid.).

Edwards certainly has a point, but critical response to both Whishaw and Carvel indicates that the play's 'female energy' was also sacrificed on the altar of gender – an interest in gender was apparent throughout the rehearsal process and the production as well as in its reception. For example, Goold's introduction to the production in the programme suggests that *The Bacchae* 'brings to the modern stage questions timeless and undeniably timely – about gender, about wildness, and about who, when the framework of society is stripped away, we really are.' Based on how this manifested in the production, it is tempting to respond to Goold's remark by observing that the 'timeless and undeniably timely' questions about gender and 'who ... we really are' are chiefly concerned with men. As Liz Schafer wrote in her review for *Times Higher Education*, '[g]iven the play's interest in the gender continuum, it is hard not to ask questions of the casting. Agave is a 'women of a certain age' role, the kind of role that actresses of a certain age find to be in short supply.'

According to Edwards, Whishaw sought to play Dionysus as genderfluid (interview). In this regard, therefore, the production can be mapped onto a queer reading of *The Bacchae* – at least to some extent. In such a reading conducted by Natalia Theodoridou, she positions Dionysus as 'a true knight of queer,' one who 'blends characteristics of both genders, creating a queer, new mixture, which matches perfectly the image of the most ambiguous of gods' (78). The critical response to Whishaw seems to indicate that he precisely embodied this conception of the queer Dionysus. Theodoridou goes on to argue that Pentheus is 'infected' by Dionysus' queerness in Euripides' play, becoming a 'queer subject whose body is going to be dismembered/deconstructed in the hands of his deviant mother' (81). In this context,

Theodoridou proposes, gender is exposed as a masquerade, a garb (83). Perhaps Carvel's performance demonstrated this, but as Theodoridou concludes that *The Bacchae* 'can be seen as either subversive or appropriative of gender roles,' it raises questions as to what purpose Macdonald's interest in gender served (84). In the light of comments that conflate gender play with sexuality (Cox: 'Later, you wonder if the king isn't a closet gay as he throws himself, with ever more abandon, into transforming himself into a woman') it must also be asked whether *The Bacchae* is a suitable site for discussing modern nuances of gendered identity.

It seems that in attending to gender, the production divested the potential to attend to women. In Daniel Mendelsohn's 'editorial' in the programme, he writes that 'hovering between divine majesty and human weakness, magnificence and pettiness – and between male and female – the teasing, seductive, playful, epicene god [Dionysus] is a great study in ambiguity. Above all, it is his effeminacy ... that fascinates both us and the other characters' (8). Certainly Macdonald was fascinated, and this fascination was extended into a staging that shifted attention away from women and gender onto men and gender. Macdonald may have achieved his desire to discover new dimensions to the play by utilising an Athenian model of casting – Susannah Clapp's review comments that 'Euripides' debate between passion and intellect, wildness and restraint is ingeniously filtered through ideas of what it is to be male and female.' But the bodies conveying this were, despite any capacity to bend gender in performance, exclusively male presenting. It is significant that Edwards notes the production emerged from a 'male hivemind' – she was the only woman on the main creative team – and that while the femaleness of the chorus was discussed in rehearsals, no awareness of this manifested in performance (interview). This puts the production in direct contrast with Kneehigh's a decade earlier, which approached the universal themes of the play – that battle between wildness and

restraint – via what it means to be female and feminine. In this way, the production underscores its significance as postfeminist: produced in the wake of feminist activity in the theatre and outside of it, aware of the significance of the story to women but unwilling to address it, and guided by progressive impulses that align with feminist interests (namely, undermining the tyranny of gender) but doing so by privileging male bodies.

What happened at the Almeida might be understood as a succession of interrelated choices that demonstrate the privileging of the male in British theatre. This encompasses the freedoms afforded by the star system at work in the relative positions of Macdonald versus Edwards, Whishaw and Carvel versus the women of the chorus. It includes Macdonald's willingness to use his power and position to attempt to recreate staging conventions of an androcentric culture on one of the foremost stages of the UK, regardless of whether this meant taking parts away from (older) women. It also includes, by extension, Goold's capacity to make this rarefied reading happen by programming an entire season around it. Finally, it includes the way reviewers are trained to invest their attention in male performers over and above women. In a male director's pursuit of an academic reading of *The Bacchae* and the resulting limits placed on the chorus, the situation strongly recalls Poel's approach to the 1908 production – both groups of women playing the maenads, in 1908 and in 2015, were understandably disgruntled. The situation is more complicated, however, because like McCarthy, Whishaw reinvented Dionysus using a combination of his own particular skills and references to models of gender beyond the theatre. This may be a queer interpretation of Dionysus as genderfluid by an out, queer actor, but the production itself was not queer. Queerness interrupts dominant structures of power – what happened at the Almeida was a product of those structures in practice. If reading *The Bacchae* as postfeminist can on the one hand denote the intersection of feminist

practices with other critical lenses – in this case, a (pseudo-)queer interest in gender – while on the other utilise the term's less progressive connotations to account for the tensions caused by such an intersection, then the Almeida production is best described as postfeminist: ten women, all playing the title role, placed centre stage but still somehow on the margins.

### **The Maenad as Postfeminist Icon**

The productions explored in this chapter demonstrate a range of ways in which the representation of women offered by *The Bacchae* has been interpreted in the twenty-first century UK by theatre-makers professing some level of interest in women. The readings of the play that manifested in the Kneehigh and Northampton productions extend aspects of those found in *Rites* and *A Mouthful of Birds*, but crucially make new, more immediate claims for them by presenting them as representations of Euripides rather than as adaptations. The productions have aspects in common. Firstly, they suggest that Agave has a pivotal role to play in the narrative of *The Bacchae*. Secondly, they seek to articulate a range of women's experiences via the chorus. Thirdly, they provide justification for these women's appeal to the Dionysiac that undermines sexist associations of women and irrationality. For both productions, oppression under patriarchal conditions is situated as the reason for which the women become maenads. In the case of Northampton, this is added to by positioning the chorus as contemporary anti-establishment activists. As Casado-Gual suggests, drawing on Richard Seaford, these productions thus imagine the conditions in which such a god as Dionysus might be socially relevant (53). But both productions also suggest that those conditions are as symptomatic of modernity as of the ancient world, if not more so. Consequently, these readings situate women – Agave in Kneehigh and the chorus in Northampton – as the tragic subjects of the play.

Yet the ways in which these productions staged their readings of *The Bacchae* complicates the feminist impulses that generated them. Crucially, these complications arose from the same adaptation processes that also enabled the pro-women readings. Kneehigh's collaborative, multivocal process led to the chorus' embodiment by male actors. The written material for the maenads, which articulates a range of different women's perspectives, was thus performed in a way that was ironic or, more generously, perhaps a provocation to undermine the authority of binary gender. It did, however, serve to align the chorus with Dionysus against Agave, signalling the tragic outcome of the narrative. In the Northampton production, Lowe and Sansom's recourse to male-created archetypes in order to animate their chorus as transhistorical embodiments of subversive femaleness led to ambivalence in their intended capacity to effectively represent women liberated from patriarchal oppression. In fact, it underscored the chorus' subservience to a different kind of male authority. It also indicated a possible fetishizing of 'wild women' as pseudo-feminist icons whose contained subversiveness in fact upholds patriarchal cultural structures. Even so, as with Kneehigh, the limitation of this dramaturgical device was acknowledged and used to inform the end of the play, in which the women are abandoned by Dionysus and left to confront the emptiness of their archetype-based identities. In both cases the limitations of the staging strategies adopted for the play's female characters can also be articulated as part of a feminist reading – this underscores the entanglement of contradictions that I suggest can be best understood through the rubric of postfeminism.

This is also a helpful way to approach the Almeida's *Bakkhai*. In this instance, Carson's poetic reimagining of the chorus within the parameters of Euripidean translation was set to provide a startling *coup de théâtre* with the biggest professional all-female, all-singing chorus in

the play's UK performance history, prefiguring Greig and Gray's *The Suppliant Women*. The chorus were diverse in age as well as ethnic and racial backgrounds; the staging and design situated the group as contemporary, ordinary women whose participation in the Dionysiac cult is a choice. Their agency as performers was undermined, however, by the overwhelming technical difficulty of Gough's score. Furthermore, Macdonald's pursuit of a Euripidean staging and interest in gender combined academic and modern ideas in a way that ultimately privileged the male actors outside the chorus. While the way in which Dionysus, Pentheus and Agave were embodied and performed stood to realise the queer potentiality of the play, the female-embodied chorus highlighted Carvel's maleness, casting Agave as a performative construction, her suffering an extension to Pentheus, rather than making her a tragic subject in her own right. This indicated the production's interest in gender as ultimately a male-centric project. The combination of elements that gave focus to women with those that took it away can be understood as postfeminist.

*The Lightning Child* provided an example of a creative process in which men working on *The Bacchae* may be guided by feminist impulses but end up creating a performance that has significant anti-feminist aspects, which I describe as reflective of a postfeminist sensibility. The other productions examined in this chapter provide further examples. One example is Laurie Sansom in the Northampton production, whose position as artistic director of the Royal & Derngate impacted his directorial choices on *The Bacchae*. While he used his position to programme a season focusing on ('wild') women and contributed to the women-centric understanding of the play, Sansom pushed back against Lowe's more overt feminist and environmentalist reading. In the case of the Almeida, James Macdonald was responsible for getting Carson's *Bakkhai* programmed and, if Edwards is to be believed, inadvertently getting



productions of *The Oresteia* and *Medea* programmed alongside it, both of which proved to be women-centric. Yet Macdonald's singular interest in an Athenian-style staging, combined with the star casting of Whishaw and (to a lesser extent) Carvel, hampered the capacity for his production of *The Bacchae* to be similarly focused on women. This, of course, raises questions about the male-dominated power structures of mainstream producing houses (and British theatre more widely). Clearly these structures are not entirely hostile to feminist influences and certainly they are capable of producing women-centric interpretations of the canon – indeed, the other shows in the Almeida season indicate this. But they are also clearly limited. As such, it cannot be overlooked that in the productions explored here, it is the women who contributed to them that most influenced their women-centric aspects. It is also hugely significant that the only production discussed here directed by a woman, Kneehigh's, offered the most explicitly women-centric reading of the play yet to appear on the national UK stage. Emma Rice remains only one of two women to have directed the play at this level of national attention.<sup>94</sup> Women having creative agency can make a difference.

Walker, Sansom, and Macdonald all had an interest in gender and sexuality when approaching the play. As Theodoridou makes clear, the play does seem to be particularly amenable to a queer reading. But this depends on aspects of the live-text when *The Bacchae* first appeared in Athens – the expectations of the audience, the prevailing context of Euripides' work, and the staging practices of the Athenian stage. On today's stage, where women have an infinitely greater capacity to engage in all aspects of theatre-making (and viewing), there is a question as to whether, in the interests of exploring gender, casting male actors as women ends

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<sup>94</sup> The other is Nancy Meckler in 1988. Of course, many fringe, student, and small-scale productions (the majority of which, I suspect, have no lasting record) have had significant involvement by women. I discuss some of these in the next chapter.

up marginalising women from a play that ostensibly offers them a major stake. The 2017 Oxford Greek Play is an instructive example here: director Sean Kelly was strongly motivated to stage a queer reading, and he cast an equal mix of male and female-bodied actors in the chorus. He also cast three male-bodied actors as Dionysus (though one of these actors identifies as genderqueer and uses the pronouns they/them; Kelly, interview). Kelly doubled chorus members with small roles such as Teiresias or the first messenger – but only male-bodied members of the chorus. As such, in pursuit of a queer agenda, the production minimised the number of female bodies on stage and how many lines they received while expanding the number of male bodies on stage. Furthermore, seeking to read Pentheus as motivated by gay, bisexual, or trans desire may have a double effect: overstating Pentheus' significance in the play at the expense of Agave, and opening up potential for the play to be received as homophobic or transphobic.<sup>95</sup>

This raises questions about *The Bacchae* more broadly. The most women-centric productions explored here employed adaptation processes to facilitate their readings. If Euripides' dramaturgy and a more literal translation are employed, is the outcome invariably androcentric? I concur with Macdonald that, in the context of 405 BCE at least, the Pentheus / Agave doubling provided a substantial part of the play's meaning. I do not think, however, that the Almeida example suggests that androcentricity is inevitable. Experiments around gender do not have to be conducted via male bodies alone, and the resonances of the Pentheus / Agave doubling could be explored just as effectively by a woman playing them. This could extend to Dionysus: the *Guardian* may have suggested that Whishaw was 'dream casting' for the role, but if the god really erases gender, a woman might just as easily take the part ('The Guardian view

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<sup>95</sup> See Kay Gabriel's review of Carson's translation, which suggests reading Pentheus as motivated by trans desire makes the play complicit in transphobic ideas. Gabriel's review demonstrates how this can easily implicate the play and productions of it in discourses of feminism versus trans rights.

on Greek A-level').<sup>96</sup> Of course, there remain limitations placed by institutional producing contexts: choruses are expensive, making them almost impossible to all but major theatres; in those theatres, star power often fuels casting practices, meaning the chorus are more likely to be lesser known performers or recent graduates, and making Agave a hard sell to a major female performer.<sup>97</sup> This does not, however, rule out the possibility that this could happen.

*The Suppliant Women* that toured the UK to much acclaim demonstrated one route to achieving a women-centric production; it is particularly applicable given the central role of the chorus in *The Bacchae*. Even so, the community chorus model could leave the women at the centre of the production unpaid for their labour. As I discussed in the introduction to this chapter, that production is also marked as postfeminist in the claims it makes for Aeschylus, containing feminist and anti-feminist ideas in a way that elides the work of contemporary creatives in crafting a women-centric reading from ancient material that had no relationship with feminism. There is also the issue of Gray championing such a reading while also standing accused of multiple counts of inappropriate behaviour towards women. It seems that doing Greek tragedy in certain contexts in contemporary theatre very often results in postfeminist work. The potential frustrations that might be felt with such a label are legitimate – postfeminism can and has been used to denote that feminism is irrelevant – but I would hope that these frustrations serve to energise efforts to unpick the fusing of feminist and anti-feminist elements at the level of practice.

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<sup>96</sup> Consider performers such as Tilda Swinton, Katy Owens, Maxine Peake, Tamsin Grieg, Cynthia Nixon, Hillary Swank, and Felicity Huffman, who all have either longstanding associations with gender fluidity, or have recently played roles that blurred gender lines in some way (my thanks to the many individuals on Twitter who helped compile this list). Of course, McCarthy is a reminder that Dionysus can and has been played by a woman.

<sup>97</sup> I am grateful to Helen Eastman for making these observations about the pragmatic limitations of institutional theatres at the APGRD's postgraduate symposium in 2018.

For now, conceptualising the nexus of feminist and anti-feminist elements in twenty-first century performance receptions of Greek tragedy as postfeminist can help develop understanding of how representations of ancient female characters function in a culture that has been influenced by decades of feminist activism but is still ultimately androcentric in its structures and thinking. For *The Bacchae*, it reveals a repeated impulse to want to understand the appeal of maenadism beyond the frame of a religious cult, and to read maenads as powerful and empowering female figures in their own right. At the same time, it shows an awareness of the maenad as a fallible figure of liberated womanhood, one fraught with contradictions arising from the maenad's violent actions and submission to a male god. As such, the maenad may provide a useful metaphor for postfeminist times – a cultural moment where there is much interest in the subversive action of women against male-led authority, but where the feminist impact of this subversiveness is often undermined by being contained within a wider patriarchal framework that has no interest in gender equality, but is instead interested only in the inevitable perpetuation of its own power.

## CHAPTER 4 Maenads on the Fringe

In this chapter, I bring the chronological arc of my case studies up to date, dealing with productions as recent as May 2017. I also turn to a different theatre-making context, one that offers new possibilities and challenges: fringe theatre. The UK has a vibrant fringe theatre scene, demonstrated most clearly by annual fringe festivals in many of the country's major cities, most prominently Edinburgh. But fringe theatre is not limited to festivals. Although the work made rarely enjoys as long a run as in large, institutional theatres – fringe shows are sometimes put before an audience for one or two performances only – in cities such as London it is possible to see such work on almost any day of the year in small independent venues, pub theatres, or a wide variety of found spaces. Fringe theatre is particularly ephemeral, in part due to its brevity, and in part due to inconsistent archiving, with the internet offering the best chance for this kind of work to have a lasting presence. Alongside the historic emphasis by scholars on institutional theatre, the ephemerality of the fringe means that it is a kind of theatre that is rarely accounted for in performance histories. This is a great loss, not least because the conditions of fringe theatre often facilitate receptions of 'the classics' that rarely, if ever, can be replicated in institutional contexts. As such, this chapter aims to account for a fraction of fringe engagement with *The Bacchae* from the last few years.<sup>98</sup>

As well as examining recent work in an underexplored part of British theatre, this chapter also provides an opportunity to reframe some of the discussion from previous chapters. Up until now I have looked at the relationship between women, feminism, and *The Bacchae*

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<sup>98</sup> As part of documenting the fringe receptions I discuss in this chapter, I have included versions of the texts used for *By Jove's Before They Told You What You Are* and *Here She Comes*.

from the perspective of someone external to the theatre-making processes at the heart of this constantly evolving relationship. This can only be so much use: after all, it is relatively easy to identify feminist or anti-feminist aspects of a past production from the outside, but when you are involved a production it quickly becomes apparent how even the best of feminist intentions can lead to problematic outcomes. In this chapter, therefore, I shift perspective so that I can explore the theatre-making process more fully, from within, as one of the practitioners.

Much of my career as a director, writer, and dramaturg has been on the fringe, and I continue to work in this context. This has, in part, been a creative choice: the work I have been involved with has benefited from the unique conditions offered by working on the margins of theatre culture, particularly in the sense that it has allowed politics and formal experimentation to have a much more fundamental role in the theatre-making process. The majority of this work has been with By Jove Theatre Company, a collaborative group of artists I helped to found in 2011 and have worked with ever since. In 2014, 2015, and 2017, we produced work that engaged with *The Bacchae* and was shaped by our shared feminist ethos. In 2016, I had the opportunity to work on another fringe production of *The Bacchae*, this time with Lazarus Theatre Company. As my work on these productions was inevitably informed by the research carried out for this study, and because their performance outcomes are congruous with the productions I have been exploring in previous chapters, discussing them here is important both in its own right – an act of adding to the archive – and as an instructive way to move from my case studies towards concluding reflections. As I switch focus towards the fringe, therefore, I make a concomitant methodological shift. As such, the ‘I’ in this chapter is the perspective of a participant-observer, the voice of someone who simultaneously influenced the productions discussed and witnessed the complex, multi-faceted process of putting the productions together. There are problems with

this – it necessitates documentation, and of course I am not an unbiased witness – but it will allow me to enrich my overall findings.

One of the immediate advantages of approaching this material as a maker is the pronounced shift from performance to process. My use of live-text as an approach to performance necessitates consideration of how elements of a live-text have come about. As such, in previous chapters I have attempted to keep the theatre-making process in the picture, but this has been dependent on the often fragmented archival traces I have been able to locate. Even interviews with living practitioners offer only a partial testimony to process, coloured as this material is by months, years, or decades' worth of hindsight. By bearing witness to the productions I discuss, I can provide a more thorough account of processes that are as revealing in terms of this study's purposes as the productions themselves. Gay McAuley's 2012 monograph *Not Work But Magic: An Ethnographic Account of a Rehearsal Process* has provided an instructive methodological example. McAuley's engagement with the 2007 production of Michael Gow's *Toy Symphony* in Sydney sets out to 'make possible a more nuanced understanding of the real artistry involved in what it is that the director does and what the playwright contributes to the process' as well as provide 'a deeper appreciation of the profoundly collaborative nature of theatrical creation' (4). As she argues, the 'critical apparatus provided by theatre studies (historiography, semiotics, text and performance analysis) [are] insufficient when attempting to deal with the complex interpersonal relations, work practices and the collective creative process involved in rehearsal.' Thus McAuley draws on methodological practices from the fields of ethnography and micro-sociology (ibid.). Her approach proves illuminating for classical reception. As much as documenting performance outcomes that engage with classic texts is crucial work for the field – and, as in the rest of this study, I do that

here – exploring process can reveal new facets of how these texts have circulated and proved meaningful in reception, facets that may never perceptibly manifest in a performance witnessed by an audience member, or when read through a partial archive. The inclusion of this chapter as part of this study thus provides a unique dimension to the understanding of *The Bacchae* in the modern world.

Although I have changed methodology, my key research question remains the same: how have women theatre-makers engaged with *The Bacchae*? This chapter presents both familiar and new complications. Feminism is in the frame in a more pronounced way than any of the case studies I have previously discussed, in so far as By Jove's and Lazarus' productions were influenced by the explicit feminist intentions of members of both companies. As these productions took place in what might be described as the feminist fourth wave, Nicola River's comments on this particular manifestation of the movement highlights the issues at stake in this chapter. She writes: 'fourth-wave feminism is fractured and complex, frequently reinforcing the advancement of the individual and centring the seductive notions of "choice," "empowerment," and "agency"' (24). While these concepts have been the focus of previous waves, in the current moment they have taken on additional complexities because of their entanglement with neoliberal and neoconservative principles that foreground individualism over collectivism or community (ibid.). At the same time, the fourth wave is also characterised by the resurgence in feminist discourse and activism in globalised Western culture in the second decade of the twenty-first century.<sup>99</sup> Unsurprisingly this potential for contradiction makes the fourth wave congruous with the 'cultural phenomenon' of a postfeminist sensibility I discussed in the

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<sup>99</sup> While acknowledging the lack of consensus over exact dates for individual feminist 'waves,' Rivers tentatively offers 2008, 2011, and 2013 as possible beginnings of the fourth wave (22).



previous chapter (3). As Rivers observes, 'popular culture and contemporary discussions of feminism have arguably become so saturated with this postfeminist sensibility that it is hard to tell where postfeminism ends and the fourth wave begins' (16). While work based on *The Bacchae* in a fringe theatre context may not be 'popular culture,' the productions I discuss here are implicated in the entanglement of postfeminism and fourth wave feminism, both in the way many of the women making the work understood their identity as women and as feminists, and in the way that *The Bacchae* lent itself to discussions of choice, empowerment, agency, and individualism versus collectivism. Addressing these productions from the perspective of a participant, and placing emphasis on process, allows me to focus in greater detail on the intricacies of the exchange between feminist thought and ancient play. Moreover, it allows me to draw attention to what McAuley describes as the 'issue of creative agency' that is so pertinent to the fringe encounters between women and *The Bacchae* I discuss here (4).

### **Writing about the Fringe, Writing about Practice**

Before exploring this chapter's productions, it is important to address in further detail the two new features that inform my discussion. Firstly, why write about fringe theatre? Work produced in a fringe context often has a very limited public run; in addition, fringe venues often have very small capacities and because of the limited resources available to theatre-makers in this context – especially when it comes to marketing – there is no guarantee of full, or even half-full, houses.<sup>100</sup> The difficulties in publicising this kind of work, especially in an urban theatre scene as densely crowded as, for example, London, mean that it is hard to attract the general public at all.

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<sup>100</sup> At one hundred and eighty seats, the Cockpit in north London is one of the largest fringe venues; elsewhere, capacities of thirty to fifty are common.

As a result, it is very common for fringe theatre to rely, to greater and lesser degrees, on the patronage of a network of friends and family associated with those involved in the production in order to make ventures financially viable and to play to substantial audiences. The significance of the fringe is not, therefore, its numerical impact: while a few hundred people saw *By Jove's* and *Lazarus'* productions, many thousands saw, for example, the production at the Almeida in 2015. Nor is its influence the significant factor here: limited runs and limited archives mean that in many cases influence is likely to be minimal and, at any rate, so diffuse as to be untraceable.<sup>101</sup> Rather, just as with the 1908 production, a key reason why fringe work is significant is often that it happened at all. The small scale and ephemerality of the fringe, which affect live-text and its creation in the theatre-making process, are therefore part of the fringe's value in a study such as this. Marginality is the point.

But what exactly is fringe theatre? The concept is protean: as Lyn Gardner noted in 2015, when she suggested there is 'no such thing' as fringe theatre, it is a term often used pejoratively, implying work that unhappily occupies the margins. Just as Gardner observed in her discussion of the divisiveness of the term, a centre-margin dynamic can suggest a hierarchy of value, whereby work produced outside of the 'mainstream' is intrinsically of less worth. In economic terms, this is probably true: fringe theatre-makers typically do not have as much money to pour into their work as those in the commercial or subsidised institutions (both companies with national or international profiles and large producing houses) that occupy the

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<sup>101</sup> There are also problems with connecting fringe archives to the value of fringe work more generally. Much of the material on fringe company websites is selective, curated for the purposes of publicity – companies and individuals are unlikely to showcase material that might potentially undermine their claim to artistic integrity (I write as someone who has faced exactly this challenge). Furthermore, while blog-based reviewers facilitate a partial archive for fringe work, the process of convincing online critics to attend productions has no necessary connection to the quality of the work being produced – talented producers do not always make (or work with) talented theatre-makers.

'centre.' As Elizabeth Schafer and Sara Reimers have pointed out, however, 'operating on the margins of the mainstream can be a powerful position' because it offers a space for 'experimental, alternative and unexpected' approaches to such concepts as gender (9). Similarly, Gardner observes that '[r]esources take many different forms, and those working outside institutions often have little money but a high level of resourcefulness.' It is, in fact, this uncoupling of economic and other kinds of value in fringe work that I offer as my definition: it is theatre driven primarily by passion for the work rather than any economic imperative, taking place outside of the institutional structures and high levels of public scrutiny (in, e.g., the national press) that typify what might be described as the mainstream. In this way, it intersects with other kinds of theatre – on the one hand, student and amateur theatre, which are also driven by passion (and sometimes intellectual enquiry); on the other, the work of theatre companies such as Kneehigh that can also disrupt conventional structures. It is important to observe that the distinctions between these categories are fluid; theatre-makers working on the fringe may move back and forth from student or amateur theatre, and companies that begin on the fringe may move into the mainstream over time (Kneehigh again demonstrate this; Gardner's example is Punchdrunk). Crucially, although fringe theatre-makers may not receive much or indeed any remuneration for their work, this does not necessarily make what they produce any less professional in terms of quality.

Fringe theatre-makers may work in this context precisely because of the freedoms it affords. These freedoms are partly artistic, enabling experimentation. Of course, this does involve a certain amount of pragmatism: some kinds of experimentation are prevented by financial barriers, and the additional stress placed on many of those involved (from other employment, from having to take on multiple roles in a production) can lead to artistic

compromises. The need for a group of fringe theatre-makers to multitask – in *By Jove*, for example, writers have been known to stage manage, actors to produce publicity materials, and directors to work the box office – can be rewarding all the same, leading to a more holistic engagement with the facets of the work being produced. They can become, in other words, a ‘company’ in a collective, rather than capitalist, sense.

This is, in fact, connected to the structural advantages of fringe work: the freedom to organise in a way that resists hierarchy, engenders collaboration, and encourages a sense of ownership for everyone involved. Because fringe work often plays to niche audiences, this egalitarianism can be extended to the audience, re-shaping the theatrical experience in a way that breaks down the sharp division between those on stage and those spectating. There is an economic dimension as well, in the sense that fringe theatre-makers are less likely to be alienated from their labour: they can often directly claim both the cultural capital and financial gains (if any) from the work they make. As I explore below, this is not the case for all fringe companies, nor are these benefits exclusive to the fringe, but it is important to note at this stage that the fringe facilitates these options more readily than mainstream institutions.

Another crucial aspect of the fringe that is particularly pertinent here is who makes this work. A 2006 survey commissioned by Sphinx Theatre Company indicated that the fringe is the only theatre context in which women get more work than men, at least in terms of acting, with 52% of roles going to women (Sphinx 3). While the report may be, in Schafer and Reimers’ words, an ‘impressionistic picture,’ it is telling, and corresponds with my experience of working in fringe theatre over the last decade. It is a testament not only to the different kinds of projects that come to fruition on the fringe, but also the different approaches to casting taken by those working with the canon (which may, as Schafer and Reimers indicate, be the pragmatic outcome

of there being 'more unemployed female performers than male willing to accept little or no pay' (10). It also reflects the fringe's potential to dismantle the mainstream institutional structures that have traditionally proved hostile to women. By Jove provides an example of a fairly common instance in fringe theatre, where organising as an egalitarian collective rather than as a hierarchy facilitates more women coming into positions of power. This is important to bear in mind when considering the productions discussed in this chapter.

The ephemerality and fragmented archive of the fringe present a challenge to those wishing to write about it. Working from the perspective of someone involved in the process is a productive approach. Yet it raises more challenges; McAuley discusses some of these in *Not Magic But Work*. Two of the most pressing problems concern the ethics of discussing the work of colleagues and friends. It is difficult to write objectively about people you know, ostensibly separating out their personalities and your personal relationship with them from the work they produce, while at the same time trying to trace the social relations and dynamics that played a role in the creative process. This is related to a second concern, the dilemma of informal material: when were my colleagues 'off the record'? As McAuley summarises, '[w]riting about rehearsal ... requires navigation of a fine line between betraying confidences by telling too much and failing to engage with the reality of the practice by telling too little' (8). In her position as an academic observer, McAuley was writing as an outsider, whereas I am writing as an insider – and this engenders other difficulties. I am very familiar with writing about By Jove, for example, but not in an academic context. I know how to write about the company in reports to funders and venues, in both internal and external evaluations, in grant applications, and when generating advertising copy. Circumventing these modes of writing about my practice, each of which comes with stylistic emphases and their own particular versions of the company

narrative, in order to write clearly and analytically as part of this study is itself a challenge.

Finally, there is a difficulty with referencing. I have endeavoured to support my own account by incorporating interview material as well as the copious notes kept on each production. In the case of Lazarus, I have drawn on their extensive rehearsal logs as well as material published on their blog by those involved in the production. For *By Jove's* work, it has not been possible to cite notes kept in our archive as discrete bibliographic entries, because often they are recorded in scraps and fragments. I therefore refer to these as the 'collected notes' for the production.

In writing about the three productions discussed in this chapter, I have taken several cues from the model provided by McAuley. She positions herself in ethnographic terms as a participant-observer.<sup>102</sup> In drawing on ethnography, McAuley refers to the process of attending to the 'continuous tacking between the 'inside' and the 'outside' of events'; that is, both considering the specifics of what it is being observed and setting the observation in context (James Clifford qtd. in McAuley 6). As an insider, I am able to offer particular kinds of insight into specifics; reading McAuley's awareness of needing to balance this with the 'outside' has led to my adoption of her approach. For each production, therefore, I begin by offering a detailed account of the process (or certain strands of it) before drawing together some reflections. In addition, I preface each section with a table detailing the people involved in the production, their role, and their relationship to the company. My intention is thus to explore this material in a way that is rigorous and illuminating, clearly identifying the processes that were employed, the structures of power that were at work, and the implications for this study.

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<sup>102</sup> For the nuances of this positioning, and how McAuley accounts for some of the problems it poses, see her helpful opening chapter, 'Writing About Rehearsal' (2-29).

**Tearing Up the Text: *Before They Told You What You Are* (2014 & 2015)**

SJ Brady	Performer (2014 & 2015)	Company member since 2012; co-artistic director since 2017
David Bullen	Director	Founding company member and co-artistic director since 2011
Grant Cartwright	Performer (2015)	First-time collaborator
Sinead Costelloe	Performer (2014)	Frequent collaborator; company member since 2017
Susanna Dye	Movement director (2015)	Company member since 2014
Wendy Haines	Writer & Stage Manager (2014 & 2015)	Company member since 2012
Rachel Hawkes	Performer (first workshop)	Collaborator for <i>Othello</i>
Kate Hunter	Performer (first workshop)	Collaborator for <i>Othello</i>
Todd James	Musician (2014 & 2015)	Company member 2012-2016
Siân Mayhall-Purvis	Performer (2014 & 2015)	Company member 2012-2017
Nicole Savin	Publicity Designer (2014 & 2015)	Founding company member
James Walker-Black	Performer (2014 & 2015)	Founding company member; co-artistic director 2013-2017
Alexander Woodward	Writer (2014 & 2015); Performer (2014)	Founding company member
Alex Yagma	Performer (first workshop)	Collaborator for <i>Othello</i>
Vivienne Youel	Choreographer (2014)	Frequent collaborator

Table 2. People involved in *Before They Told You What They Are*, their main roles on the project, and their relationship to the company.

By Jove's first engagement with *The Bacchae*, *Before They Told You What You Are* (Before henceforward), began as a commission for performance at the Annual Meeting of Postgraduates in Reception of the Ancient World (AMPRAW) in December 2014, hosted by the University of London. I was part of the organising committee for the conference, which was on the subject of authenticity in the reception of the ancient world – the team wanted a performance to close the proceedings and had funding to support it. This coincided with plans by the company to produce an adaptation of *The Bacchae* in 2015; as such, we initially looked to the AMPRAW commission as an opportunity to develop new material. The specificity of the commission engendered some concrete circumstances that shaped what we produced: we knew the performance was a one-off; we had a certain amount of funding that indicated the scope of the project; and we knew that we would perform in a seminar room in Senate House library. We also knew that our audience of academics, many of whom were classicists, would be very familiar with Euripides' play, allowing us the potential to move further away from it in the knowledge that verbal and visual signifiers that might be lost on a less specialist group would be recognised in relation to *The Bacchae*. The theme of the conference further inspired us to provoke a discussion around authenticity by deliberately moving away from the text of the play itself. The piece we eventually presented was developed in two initial workshops that explored the text, followed by three weeks of devising in a rehearsal room that tore it up and created something new from the pieces. This was a series of fragments of text and movement that followed the intertwining narratives of Agave, Pentheus, and Dionysus.<sup>103</sup> After the AMPRAW performance, funding difficulties as well as the announcement of the Almeida production – which, with its central positioning of Whishaw, became much anticipated – frustrated attempts

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<sup>103</sup> A breakdown of these fragments and their content at different stages of developing *Before* can be found in Appendix A.



to stage a longer run for the piece, but it was restaged in a revised version with a slightly different cast at Royal Holloway's annual Play! festival in June 2015.

By Jove's constitution enshrines our co-operative structure as a collaborative group of artists who regularly work together, each with an equal stake in and ownership of the work, and each expected to be involved in all aspects of producing it, including (where appropriate) the administrative, marketing, and fundraising aspects in addition to creative engagement. As we do not have the means to support the company members with a regular income – we instead seek funding on a project-by-project basis – this division of labour makes the creative work possible. Two members take on the position of co-artistic directors at any one time; these designations are mostly practical (for the purposes of authorising purchases, for example) and confer no additional powers or rights. Our artistic remit is to create theatre based on myths, legends, and culturally familiar stories, reshaping them from our shared socialist, feminist perspective. Prior to *Before* we had produced four productions based on such texts as *The Oresteia*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Othello*. The latter forms the immediate context for *Before*: it was produced in August 2014 and was financially successful, encouraging us to make more ambitious plans for the AMPRAW work than we were ultimately able to deliver.

Although each member of the company has particular disciplinary specialisms that reflect their training and experience – directing, performing, writing, and so on – movement between roles is fluid when it comes to each project. SJ Brady, for example, directed *Othello*; in *Before* Brady performed, and I directed. There are generally between eight and ten core company members at any one time, with nine during *Before* (four men and five women); not all members are obliged to be involved in every project if, for example, they are working elsewhere at the time. Frequently collaborating together has meant an intimate familiarity with one

another as theatre-makers. When the project calls for it, we also recruit additional collaborators, emphasising to them the company's principles of shared ownership and collective creation, though our ethical reservations about involving too many other individuals when we cannot offer them permanent membership (and thus a permanent stake in our work) have meant that recently we have striven to work more within our established group. *Before* was a turning point in this respect: it began with a fairly large number of these collaborators, but as we were then unable to support them, we had to cut back on the group working on the project. The performances in 2014 and 2015 did, however, help us begin to identify key aspects of our working practice, particularly the importance of devising and long-term redevelopment.

As I worked on *Before* as the project's director, and it is my perspective as a participant-observer that underpins my account of the process, it is worth explaining exactly what a director does in By Jove. The collaborative, egalitarian nature of the group means that the traditionally authoritative position of the director functions differently. While a By Jove director does take the lead on aspects of the work – structuring rehearsals and chairing production meetings, for example – they have more of a curatorial role, co-ordinating the contributions of the group with a view to ensuring the work presented for an audience is coherent. The director takes part in discussions during rehearsals, contributing ideas, but often joins those engaging on the project as writers in observing devising activities rather than participating in them; the directors and writers can thus respond as observers while the performers respond from the perspective of being a part of the activity. This certainly reflects my role in the process for *Before*.

This process began in late September 2014 with our first exploratory workshop. In this session, there were seven company members and four collaborators, six women and five men (see table 2). Of these, six intended to be involved as performers, four of whom were women.

This reflects our initial intentions for the project: to assemble a substantial ensemble of performers with a range of skills. Early notes I kept on the project listed the experience of each of the performers as singers, musicians, dancers, and in one case, a circus performer (By Jove, Collected notes for *Before*). This demonstrates the multidisciplinary nature of the group we put together and our intention to make this a feature of our interpretation. Our profit from *Othello* and the funding from AMPRAW put us in a strong position to receive financial support from other sources, and at the time of the first workshop we were waiting to hear back on applications to, among others, Arts Council England. In the workshop, we read an English-language version of *The Bacchae* I had specially adapted from the Loeb edition, talked about the Dionysiac cult, and explored key moments from the play – namely, the two messenger speeches – through ensemble-focused physical exercises.<sup>104</sup> My intention at this stage was to provoke the group to think about the experience of being a part of the Dionysiac cult as well as what it would be like to witness the cult in action. Towards the end of the workshop, discussion turned to how the material related to life in the UK in the twenty-first century, with an agreed intention to explore this more fully at the next workshop in October. Those interested in writing material for the project were invited to respond to the activities and bring their work to this next session.

Between the first and second workshop, we received the news that we had been unsuccessful in securing any additional funding. The immediate outcome of this was a change in the project's scope: all but one of the collaborators (Sinéad Costelloe, who regularly works with us and has since become a member) left the project. These were all performers, and the most

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<sup>104</sup> These were adapted from ensemble exercises I used when directing *The Bacchae* in early 2011, which were in turn based on the practice of Polish company Gardzienice. I had originally used the exercises to train the chorus to work cohesively as a unit but discovered in the process that they helped approximate the ecstatic collectivity of the Dionysiac cult. It was for this reason that I turned to them again to help the By Jove group access some sense of what it would be like to be a maenad.

accomplished musicians of the group aside from our company musician, Todd James; they were also all recent collaborators, having first worked with us on *Othello*; and amongst their number were two people of colour. We were thus reduced in diversity, numbers, and musical talent, but we were now working as a group who were very familiar with one another, having collaborated together for three years. The possibilities of what we might produce in terms of design also became more limited due to budgetary constraints. Fewer people involved also meant more work in producing the project for those who remained. While this had a certain demoralising effect amongst the company members, it nevertheless sharpened our understanding of the parameters within which we were now working. It is difficult to pinpoint any particular aesthetic decisions that were a direct result of this change, but in forcibly making us aware of the project's limitations, it narrowed the range of possibilities as to what might be produced.

The second workshop, attended by the now reduced group, proved to be highly productive. Primarily discursive rather than practical, it established key areas of interest that we would go on to pursue in the devising sessions that followed. These were summarised in the programme note we put together for the AMPRAW performance:

We were drawn to *The Bacchae* because we saw it as a play about liberation – though it is not simply about release, or about the consequences of that release. Rather, it portrays liberation as a complex and contradictory process that creates new problems even as it solves others. Something about that resonated with us. In 21st century Britain, it's often argued that we're in a "post-feminist" period and that women's liberation has been achieved. But what does it mean to be liberated? What happens after 'liberation'? And if it has happened, why hasn't it led to equality for women? (By Jove, Programme note for *Before*)

Evident in this note is the slippage we purposefully created between Dionysiac liberation and (post)feminism; the second workshop was where the interest in that slippage began to be

developed. At this early stage, however, the extent to which this would be expressed theatrically through the text, characters, or even narrative of *The Bacchae* was far from certain. The discussion in the second workshop mainly revolved around postfeminism, specifically in relation to women's ownership of their bodies, the agency of the sexually desiring female subject, and the ways that these concepts are influenced by both feminist and misogynist discourses. This was closely tied to *The Bacchae* and in fact emerged from reflection on the first workshop; the heading in our notes from the second session borrows a phrase I used in the first, 'the body is at stake in *The Bacchae*' (By Jove, 'Bacchae Workshop Notes').

One notable body at stake in popular culture that we discussed was that of singer Miley Cyrus. She came up in our discussion about how the female body is constantly being put on display in Western culture, and how, once on display, this body is subjected to competing expectations about how it should appear, act, and be deployed. Cyrus' controversial performance at the MTV Video Music Awards in 2013, during which she danced in a sexually provocative manner with Robin Thicke while co-performing the latter's song *Blurred Lines*, became a reference point.<sup>105</sup> We speculated as to whether the performance, in which Cyrus invited both Thicke and the audience to imagine her body in a sexual context, was a decision made by her, her management, or others. This led to questions: to what extent was she utilising her body to assert her power as a woman in an industry in which they have traditionally been subordinated to men? Is it possible for a woman in such a position of power to 'own' the objectification of her body by becoming willingly complicit in the process? It was this that led to a broader discussion about the slippage between liberation and overt sexuality, and how the

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<sup>105</sup> Multiple recordings can be found on YouTube: for example, at <https://youtu.be/XhZnnsTBYA4> (Thicke appears at approximately 3.05). *Blurred Lines* was itself the subject of much controversy as a result of its seeming glorification of rape culture.

performance of a liberated self, particularly for women, is reincorporated into an economy of oppression through the sexual (re)objectification of the notionally liberated body.

We compared this to *The Bacchae*, considering the agency the maenads have in their worship of Dionysus, the extent to which their experience of the Dionysiac is determined by their own desires, and the way in which Pentheus' own assumptions about the sexual activities of the maenads is linked to his desire to look at their bodies. This prompted two of the group, Siân Mayhall-Purvis and Wendy Haines, to bring into this debate a further dimension: the influence of prevailing feminist ideas in culture. Referencing the much publicised confrontation between Cyrus and fellow singer Sinéad O'Connor, who wrote an open letter to the younger artist about her VMA performance, Mayhall-Purvis and Haines said that, according to their own experiences, they felt binary expectations exist for women and their bodies: the polar opposites of the feminist, liberated body and the sexually objectified patriarchal body (By Jove, Collected notes for *Before*).<sup>106</sup> The women of Thebes are caught between these, represented by the figures of Dionysus (the liberated body) and Pentheus (the objectified body); the fact that both are male is telling. We wanted to ask: where does their own agency come into play? It is easy to assert that the Theban women are either being freed from oppression or simply re-subjugated, but we wanted to re-think the binary represented by Dionysus and Pentheus as a spectrum so that we might discover something of the grey area between extremes. The phrase that ultimately emerged from this workshop and became a crucial reference point throughout was that 'liberation is more complicated than it seems.' This was a concept to which we all felt *The Bacchae* spoke.

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<sup>106</sup> Cyrus' performance was the subject of much feminist (and anti-feminist) discourse in 2013 and afterwards, as was her encounter with O'Connor. Rivers offers a fascinating account of the issues in her chapter on 'tensions between the waves' of feminism (29-55).

During the second workshop we read *A Mouthful of Birds*. This was my suggestion, and we discussed what the piece offered us in terms of our own thinking about *The Bacchae* (By Jove, 'Bacchae Workshop Notes'). Perhaps the most significant outcome to emerge from this was an interest in Dionysus as a catalytic force. Earlier in the workshop we had discussed the concept of freedom as an ideology rather than a state of being (ibid.). The function and representation of Dionysus in *A Mouthful of Birds* – a dancing body that, in the act of possession, prompts transformative change – provided an example for us of how we might re-imagine the god as the purveyor of his 'ideology of freedom' without becoming didactic. Reading Churchill and Lan's text also initiated conversation amongst the group about moving beyond the narrative of *The Bacchae* in our adaptation: the notes from the end of the session list ideas such as putting the characters of Euripides' play in a new context; focusing on Semele and her relationship with her sisters; considering transgender experience; and, most ambitiously, devising a 'trilogy of 20-minute playlets,' each focusing on a different character or a different reading of Agave (ibid.).

In addition to inspiring ideas for new material, reading *A Mouthful of Birds* prompted us to decide as a group that we would reject the fragmented model pursued by Churchill and Lan. Several group members feared that it was too difficult to follow and too abstract for our intended audience. However, Haines, one of the company's main writers, was inspired by Churchill and Lan's text, and in the weeks after the second workshop produced a great deal of material that followed the earlier text's example (Haines, interview). These short scenes followed the narratives of Agave, Pentheus, and Dionysus in particular, and were given truncated titles reminiscent of *A Mouthful of Birds* – for example, 'Divinity,' 'Idol,' and 'Night' (By Jove, *Before* 2014a). Along with several poems written by Alexander Woodward, these pieces of text became

the starting point for our devising process, and ultimately informed the structure of *Before*. The nascent interest in the body and in movement emerging from the second workshop, again in part a result of reading *A Mouthful of Birds*, led to us including a movement specialist in the devising process. As the company's movement director Susanna Dye was unavailable, we engaged a regular collaborator, Vivienne Youel. With Youel, the text generated by Haines and Woodward, and the key ideas established in the second workshop, we embarked on our devising sessions.

During the first week of devising, we worked on the text generated by Haines and Woodward. Different performers amongst the group took turns playing the roles, with our musician Todd James improvising in response. In these early sessions, our engagement with the textual fragments that had been generated was designed to further develop our thematic interests, as well as develop a physical score of gestures associated with the characters on which we were increasingly focusing. We also explored the differing moods suggested by the fragments, including ecstasy, anxiousness, and rage. Aside from the character-based exploration that Haines' text facilitated in particular, we experimented with shifting between collective and individual movement as a way of exploring the overarching concept of Dionysiac possession. We made two main discoveries as a result of this exploration. Firstly, while we had not yet concluded at this stage that Haines' fragments provided a suitable structure and focus – we did not want to shut down the possibility of moving beyond the narrative of *The Bacchae* – we realised by the end of the week that Agave in particular was a shared point of interest for almost all the group members. This emerged alongside a concomitant decision not to stage a chorus of maenads, mainly because of our limited numbers but also because, as now an all-white group, we did not want to risk suggesting that our chorus represented all women. However, although



we rejected the idea of a chorus, our second discovery of the week was that bringing together all the performers in a moment of dance after a character-based piece of text had the potentially powerful effect of reasserting a Dionysiac presence pervading the narrative. It was when, early in week two, we began to give these whole ensemble interruptions short titles in the manner of Haines' fragments that we realised this fractured re-telling of the story told in *The Bacchae* would actually be the basis for our interpretation.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, it was also around this point in the process that the question of the conference's theme of authenticity began to have a bearing on the devising process. In truth, the academic context of the conference had, up until this moment, been less important to us than a sense that the material we were working through was emerging 'organically' from our interests in *The Bacchae*. The idea that authenticity might be a conceptual lens for the audience impacted our work mainly by providing the impression of a safety net – that whatever we did, our choices would be interpreted as testing or reacting against a stable notion of authenticity. This did not change when we reached a consensus about our fragmented approach and a lack of chorus, but we found more concrete political aspirations: we began to actively try to trouble the notion of what an 'authentic' stage representation of *The Bacchae* might be, provocatively asserting that a disparate collection of narrative threads following Dionysus, Pentheus, and Agave might get to the heart of what Euripides' play means to the contemporary moment better than a faithful recitation of translated Greek text. In some ways, in fact, this provocation to authenticity did become a net of sorts, a means of holding together our fragments of text and movement.

This need to find a means of coherence carried the process forward. Once we had decided to pursue a performance incorporating Haines and Woodward's material, we turned

our attention to how they might manifest on stage. As each piece of text was no more than a single page (often less than that) and as our devising exercises generated physical material to interrupt the text, we sought a way to cohere our fractured dramaturgy for the audience. Returning to Euripides' text eventually provided an answer. Observing that in the first line of *The Bacchae* in Greek, the word *kthona* (χθόνα) might refer to the physical earth or soil as much as the land of Thebes, we came up with the idea of bringing soil into the performance space. We began to play the fragments of text around a rectangular box shape in the midst of the space, imagining soil inside of it. This proved a compelling idea for the group and allowed us to quickly map out the action of the narrative in spatial terms. The soil box came to represent Cithaeron, with the relatively thin frame of clean space around it representing Thebes. This both expressed the invasion of the Dionysiac into the ordered world of Thebes and represented a subversion of the spatial politics of *The Bacchae*, where Thebes is at the centre and Cithaeron is on the margins. Moreover, introducing the soil box provided a site to explore the Dionysiac experience Agave and the women of Thebes undergo.

The introduction of the soil box was a watershed moment in the process for *Before*. As a theatrical device and as an affordable design element, it energised the group, allowing us to visualise what the piece might look like on stage. It also provided a way of approaching Woodward's mellifluous poetry, which starkly contrasted with Haines' spare prose. In the first week and a half of devising, we struggled to find a means of engaging with Woodward's text without shifting into simplistic and jarring recitation. In the latter half of the second week, we played with dividing one of Woodward's poems, 'In the Woods with Dionysus,' between the three female performers. Delivering the lines while interacting with the soil allowed us to correlate Woodward's account of the Theban women rediscovering themselves on Cithaeron

outside of patriarchal authority with the materiality of the earth as activated by the performers. This brought together several strands of thought amongst the group. Our early discussions about the body and the way it is shaped by cultural expectations was combined with the idea that Dionysus' ideology of freedom is an opportunity to return to a self prior to acculturation, free from all expectations and subject only to personal desires. This was crystallised especially in lines from Woodward's text that became so programmatic they provided our title:

Hurl away the box in which you're kept,  
Refuse to accept their labels.  
You are able to reclaim who you were before  
They told you what you are.  
Roar your true self at the stars here beside us  
As we stand in the woods, free, with Dionysus! (By Jove, *Before*  
2014b 10)

Staging this sequence in the soil box allowed us to undercut this moment as well: even as the women talk about 'hurling away the box in which they're kept' we hoped to signal to the audience that they had been enclosed by a new box, their 'freedom' encompassed by strict boundaries.

During our continued work with the soil box in the final week of the process, we discovered that it facilitated our interest in Agave even as it pushed Pentheus' story quite literally to the margins. As Pentheus' scenes were always in Thebes, he was always at the edge of the space while from approximately halfway through the piece Agave claimed the centre. At the same time, Agave could be seen as restricted to a comparatively small space, especially when joined by the other women. (Our playing with this use of space in the third week led to us deliberately constructing the soil box with dimensions that limited the movement of the women

in it.) A triptych of sequences emerged in these final sessions that plotted Agave's experience with Dionysiac liberation. These came to be called 'Miracles.'

In the first sequence, the maenads – represented by Brady, Mayhall-Purvis, and Costelloe – dug their hands into the soil to uncover springs of milk and wine, as per the first messenger's description in *The Bacchae*. Brady and Youel developed a set of gestures to indicate this ritual. While these gestures were enacted, another performer representing Dionysus would pour the 'milk' and 'wine' over the maenads; they reacted in delight. After some experimentation, we decided on salt for the milk and uncooked red lentils for the wine, which resembled liquids when poured but were also distinctly dry. The idea was to signal that although the women believed they were causing the miracles to occur, the god was the real source – and that the miracles were not what they seem. In 'Miracles 2,' Agave and the other women repeated their digging gestures, reacting as if the springs of liquids appeared even though they went unrepresented, with Dionysus watching conspicuously from one side. This motif of Dionysus' false liberation was picked up in 'Miracles 3.' In this sequence, post-murder Agave repeated the digging gestures again and again, signalling her attempt to recreate the miracles despite the way her relationship with Dionysus had been disrupted by violence. Through this repeated movement and interaction with the soil, we aimed to indicate the stages of Agave's liberation, moving from ecstasy to delusion to desperation. By the end of the devising process, we decided that 'Miracles 3' should be the final image of the piece. Agave's scrabbling in the dirt would thus aim to evoke both the frustration of having been caught between Pentheus and Dionysus and her determination to discover the power to produce miracles in herself, independent of the god.

As we prepared our piece for performance in front of an audience, a series of decisions ultimately positioned Agave as the figure through which we expressed many of our thematic

interests in *The Bacchae*. Allowing 'Miracles 3' to conclude the piece was one of these decisions. Earlier in the process we had considered alternative conclusions. The first of these, which never moved past discussion, would have seen Dionysus bring on a bag of 'false idols' and shower Agave in them, including items such as Spice Girls albums, women's magazines, and beauty products, which we hoped to position as symbols of postfeminism (By Jove, Collected notes for *Before*). Another idea, which emerged from a devising exercise, was a sequence called 'Promises,' in which the characters recounted the promises Dionysus had made to them (By Jove, *Before* 2014a). It was decided that our interests in Dionysus-as-ideology and the associated parallels with postfeminism could be expressed with much greater subtlety by simply drawing attention to Agave's gestures of desperation and defiance as she begins to cope with the world after killing her son.

A further decision in the final week sought to engage with the idea of Agave's agency. This involved the staging of a sequence called 'To Kill My Son, the Lion.' In this piece, Dionysus asks Agave to 'tell us what you've done' (By Jove, *Before* 2014b 14). She responds in two voices, one that follows Euripides' Agave prior to her anagnorisis, in which she proudly believes she has killed a lion, and another in a more contemporary voice in which she is aware of who Pentheus was all along. The text for this sequence was written by Woodward, but the idea emerged from explorations in the rehearsal room that sought to provide a counter-narrative to Euripides' version of events, reassessing both Agave's motive and her ultimate culpability.<sup>107</sup> As with Woodward's other poem, we had previously struggled to find an effective way to stage this, but in the final week, one experiment proved fruitful. We wanted to depict Agave's crisis of being

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<sup>107</sup> Some notes on the fragments of Aeschylus' Dionysus-Pentheus trilogy serve as a reminder that presenting a counter-narrative to Euripides' version was among our earliest ideas; as the process developed it merged with our interest in Agave (By Jove, Collected Notes for *Before*).

caught between two opposing claims to her body and self, so we played with Costelloe performing the Euripidean version at one end of the space and Brady the contemporary version at the other. The pair alternated lines, eventually coming to overlap with one another significantly, their voices blurred. When this happened in rehearsal, I found myself challenged to focus on one account or else try to make sense of both simultaneously; rather than resolve this cacophony of voices, I wanted to extend the challenge to the audience. At the climax of the piece, Brady improvised, turning to both Dionysus and those of us watching to ask, '[h]appy? Now, is there anything else you simply have to know?' This line was kept for the performance (15). This sequence thus became the crux of our subversion of Euripides, designed to dare an audience familiar with the original play to reassess their understanding of Agave whilst also directly confronting the voyeuristic desire of audiences to witness the spectacle of her suffering. Our intention was neither to absolve nor condemn Agave and her actions, but rather to centre her role in a familiar narrative, establishing her as a complicated female character of equal interest to Pentheus and Dionysus.

The idea of problematising Agave's culpability is an appropriate pivot to move from my account of the process of making *Before* to reflecting on that process. In coming to reimagine *The Bacchae* in the course of considering its relationship to contemporary issues for women, we produced a refutation of Euripides' play as much as an adaptation of it. This was the case for our fragmented, anti-Aristotelian dramaturgy as well as our reading of the original play. In this sense, we followed the example of *A Mouthful of Birds* in offering, in Helene Keyssar's term, a 'dangerous history' in our response to the play. While we sought not to position this Dionysiac liberation as feminism, we hoped to set up parallels between the exhilarating but brief revolution of the Theban women in Dionysus' name and the contradictions of the postfeminist moment:

seemingly liberating ideas that ultimately leave those who adopt them in a difficult position, but nevertheless a solution afforded by the limitations of neoliberal society. This was most pronounced – perhaps overly so – in our equivalent of Dionysus' *ex machina* speech, in which the god declared directly to the audience that he is 'the best kind of liberation you have. I'm the only way out of this rot you've allowed to fester in your world' (By Jove, *Before* 2014b 16). A further aspect of this 'dangerous history' was our intention to work against the idea that the 'madness' of Dionysus accounts for actions undertaken under his influence. The god's final speech also addresses this:

I will let you join my dance. I will free you from yourselves. I will shake down the walls you put about yourselves. I will take away your fears and let you move. I will dissolve the chains that hold you back, but you still decide the direction. 'It was the wine talking.' No it wasn't. You said what YOU felt. 'I wasn't myself.' Yes. You were. Own it. Take responsibility. I know what you are, I see what you might be without restriction. You're as free to speak of love at a symposium as you are to rip a lion's fucking head off. I only open the door and wish you the best of luck. And because you don't know any better, I'll keep on opening that door again and again – and we'll tell this story once more. (16-17)

The speech was designed to refute the notion that the realisation of an unbounded self's desires can be later recanted as irrationality. As such, we aimed to offer a reading of *The Bacchae* that suggested the play's continued cultural relevance is precisely a symptom of this covering up of transgressive desires as irrational acts carried out under possession by forces that can be separated from the self. Moreover, in positioning Agave's transformation into a maenad and violent actions as motivated by the way in which Pentheus marginalised her because of her identity as a woman, we sought to extend this reading, offering a version of Agave and the maenads before *The Bacchae* told history what they are.

If *Before* was a refutation of *The Bacchae*, it was underpinned by the specific circumstances of the performance at AMPRAW and, in different ways, at the Play! festival. Firstly, our performance space at AMPRAW – a seminar room in Senate House library – further emphasised our use of the soil. This was a substance alien to the austere environment we were performing in, making its use even more transgressive and underscoring the idea of a Dionysiac invasion into an environment that does not welcome it. I do not think it is what many of the classicists expected from what was billed in the conference programme as ‘an interpretation of *The Bacchae*.’ Yet this same billing framed our fragmented dramaturgy within the context of the play and our classics-literate audience were uniquely placed to be able to read the ways in which we were responding to Euripides’ original. In both the audience Q&A that followed the performance and the written responses we received to an audience survey, it was clear that, for example, our audience recognised that our emphasis was on Agave. Over half of the audience members who responded to our survey suggested that *Before* had shifted their perception of Agave in Euripides’ play; crucially, respondents tended to use Agave’s name when discussing her. This contrasted responses to the same survey after the 2015 performance. Fewer respondents suggested that *Before* had changed their perception of Agave in *The Bacchae*, but more said that they were drawn to her character’s narrative thread. In articulating this, however, only two responses called Agave by that name – the rest referred to her as the ‘mum’ or the ‘woman who keeps digging.’ The reference to the final image from ‘Miracles 3’ intimates the different speciality of the Play! festival audience, which was predominantly made up of academics and students from the Department of Drama, Theatre, and Dance at Royal Holloway. These audience members were able to read our performance more acutely on its own terms rather than in reference to *The Bacchae* (though some individuals in both audiences were no



doubt able to do both). Our differing audience receptions here indicate that two kinds of work were produced – the 2014 version as a subversion of Euripides, and the 2015 version as a new piece more distinct from Euripides. In this way, the audience's familiarity with *The Bacchae* impacted the meaning of each performance.

The theme of authenticity framed the commission of *Before* as well as our first performance at Senate House. The theme began as a crutch – a way for us to claim meaning in whatever the devising process produced – but became part of our politics. In the end, we (figuratively) tore up Euripides' text into pieces and rearranged them. Agave ultimately emerged as a dominant focus, particularly in the 2015 version, with Dionysus' revenge positioned as being as much against Agave as Pentheus. At the same time, Agave's agency was emphasised through a series of creative choices made as a result of a process that was influenced by research – drawing on my work for this thesis – and creative interventions, including the discursive responses to the theme of postfeminism, Haines' writing, and Brady's particular interest in Agave as a character. As a result, in *Before* Agave is no longer understood to simply be possessed by Dionysus. Instead, she makes a deal with him to relieve her of frustrations generated by Pentheus' oppressive behaviour. That gender-inflected oppression is a common cause of the Theban women's retreat to Cithaeron is suggested by the multiple scenes we included in the 2014 version of men commenting on the absence of the women in their lives.<sup>108</sup> Yet the absence of a diverse range of women's voices was underscored, unintentionally, by the absence of a chorus – something that would have been particularly conspicuous to the 2014 audience. This

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<sup>108</sup> This includes 'Garden,' the opening of the 2014 performance; 'I Believe in Dionysus,' which was present in the 2014 version but opened the 2015 performance, replacing 'Garden'; and 'Mother,' which was present in both 2014 and 2015 versions.

was ultimately a pragmatic, rather than creative, decision, and a reminder of the precarity of negotiating the making of work under fringe conditions.

Something I had not quite appreciated until coming to reflect on the process of creating *Before* was how much the work was shaped by being informed by the performance history of *The Bacchae*. This was perhaps most pronounced by my asking the group to read *A Mouthful of Birds*, which was a decision influenced by my research for this study. Beyond this, however, my conscious awareness of how productions such as those by Kneehigh and the Northampton Royal & Derngate had engaged with *The Bacchae* in a way that brought women to the fore fed into the group's desire to situate our piece as a continuation of a feminist genealogy. Our work on *Before* thus moved towards feminist theatre historiography as praxis.

As a company, By Jove have a record of re-working a particular piece multiple times over a long period – we have rarely, if ever, sought to recreate work we have done before in more or less the same way. *Before* was a turning point in the development of the company's working practice in helping us to realise the virtue of this approach. The second version of *Before* moved the piece away from the explicit politics of exploding text and its relationship to authenticity, something that turned on having a specifically academic audience. This involved the removal of some material, but it was mainly a process of recognising that Agave had become our focus and seeking to consolidate that fact. In this way, the 2015 performance of *Before* gestures towards *Here She Comes*, By Jove's next engagement with *The Bacchae*. Nevertheless, the 2014 performance remains significant, standing alongside the Play! festival performance as an example of engaging with Euripides' play in ways that are facilitated by the unique conditions of fringe work and by explicit feminist intentions.

**Telling Agave's Story Solo: *Here She Comes* (2017)**

SJ Brady	Performer, director, and writer	Company member since 2012; co-artistic director since 2017
David Bullen	Lead producer and advisor	Founding company member and co-artistic director since 2011
Sinead Costelloe	Producer and advisor	Frequent collaborator; company member since 2017
Ivo de Jager	Publicity designer	Collaborator (second of three collaborations so far)
Susanna Dye	Advisor	Company member since 2014
Wendy Haines	Advisor	Company member since 2012
Christine Plastow	Advisor	Founding company member
Rosa Whicker	Producer and advisor	Frequent collaborator
Vivienne Youel	Musician	Frequent collaborator

Table 3. People involved in *Here She Comes*, their main roles on the project, and their relationship to the company.

By Jove's second engagement with *The Bacchae* was in 2017. This was led by SJ Brady, who had performed in both versions of *Before* and, as a result, had become particularly interested in Agave. *Here She Comes* therefore began as a response to *Before* prior to being developed into a performance in its own right. It was staged as part of a triptych of pieces exploring violent women from myth and history, a year-long collaboration between By Jove and the Gallery on the Corner, small art galleries in Battersea (2016) and Tooting (2017), south west London. Prior to *Here She Comes* was *Margaret of Anjou*, which reconfigured Shakespeare's *Henry VI* and *Richard III* plays; afterwards came *Medea*, an adaptation of Euripides' play by Haines. I directed

these ‘bookends’ to *Here She Comes*, with Brady featuring in both casts. In early 2017, just prior to the show, Brady was also unanimously elected By Jove’s new co-artistic director by the company members. As such, the show was staged in a context that placed added emphasis on Agave’s violent actions and its ramifications, as well as highlighting Brady’s profile as an artist amongst the company’s members and in her own terms. *Here She Comes* remains the most solo-driven piece By Jove has ever produced: Brady wrote the text before directing and performing in it. At the same time, it was a crystallisation of the company’s thematic interests in *The Bacchae* and our wider political ethos. I contributed to and witnessed the process as a producer and advisor, particularly in regard to design and audience interaction; this was the case with several By Jovians (see table 3). To all appearances, therefore – and, to some extent, in practice – *Here She Comes* was a one-person show produced under the company’s name.

In order to identify where *Here She Comes* emerged from, it is necessary to briefly return to the 2015 performance of *Before* for the Royal Holloway Play! festival. I have already referenced the fact our initial plans to produce a run of *Before* in 2015 were curtailed. When we received funding from the Play! festival, we viewed this as an opportunity to rework the material, with a view to producing a run at a later date. As neither Woodward nor Costelloe were able to work on the Play! festival version – requiring us to recruit a first-time collaborator to make up a performance team of four (two women, two men) – the re-devising process came down to two significant changes. The first was a shift in how the parts were distributed. In the 2014 performance, key costume items signified particular characters, and we had a rule that in every fragment the characters were ‘passed’ to another actor, so that the characters were embodied by both men and women, with no one person playing them for longer than a single fragment at a time. For the Play! festival, we kept the costume signifiers and, notionally at least,

the passing of characters from actor to actor. What changed is that certain performers began to become identified with certain characters, initially in the rehearsal room and to some extent in performance. As such, Brady became identified with Agave.

The second major change in the 2015 version is testament to Brady's association with Agave. In the interim between the two performances of *Before*, Haines wrote a monologue for Agave with Brady's voice and distinctive style of performing in mind (Haines, interview). This piece, titled 'I,' underpinned the even more pronounced emphasis on Agave in the 2015 version, serving as the turning point of the piece.<sup>109</sup> Focusing on the moment in which Agave decides to leave the city and journey to Cithaeron, 'I' became the first instance that a performer interacted with the box of soil in the 2015 performance. By activating this material for the first time in the performance, Brady became closely associated with both the soil and Agave (Brady would embody Agave again in all the 'Miracles' sequences, including the one that ended the show). In 'I,' Agave's encounter with the natural environment of the mountain forest is framed in terms of her body's sensory experience: 'the air is lighter, not forced into so many bodies,' 'I can still see because my eyes adjust,' '[s]melling the dirt on my wet feet.' Haines highlights a shift in Agave as she is freed from what feels like the permanent (male) gaze of the city, simultaneously rediscovering small details of her own body:

I look upwards when I walk, and that's not something I do. There're too many eyes in the city, and here there's just mine, watching the hills get closer to me, and the sides look less steep, spreading out, and the woods. ... I slip on the moss, there's moss on the rocks in the stream and I lose my shoe. ... My little toe has a curl, a little curl. Only on one foot. (By Jove, *Before* 2015 6)

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<sup>109</sup> Agave was also emphasised by the cutting or reducing of sequences relating to Dionysus and Pentheus, including 'Divinity 1,' 'Divinity 2,' 'Anxieties/Justifications,' and 'Mirror.' The sequences that replaced the latter pair, 'Pentheus 1' and 'Pentheus 2' respectively, had much less text; 'Pentheus 2' was entirely movement based. See the table in the Appendix A for more details.

This builds to a sudden encounter with a bull. While observing the immense muscular power of the creature and the violent potential of its shape, Agave discovers an interior gentleness; she thus sees in the bull's eyes 'a promise of everything I need crying out of them' (ibid.). Finally, she reaches forward to touch the creature, a moment that, while symbolically indicating her decision to join Dionysus, also serves to affirm her decision to abandon fear and self-doubt: she asserts her will to survive (and thrive) for the first time.

I made the crucial point that even though Agave is later led into committing catastrophic violence that she may regret, the experience of becoming a maenad was liberating for her: it enabled her to rediscover a sense of her identity, corporeally and mentally, after years as part of a cultural system that reduced her to a gendered function (mother, queen) and thus marginalised her. This provided a counterpoint to her subsequent loss of identity in the frenzied attack on Pentheus. It opened up a gap between the maenadic as a reconfiguration of the female self outside of the cultural mechanisms of the androcentric city, and the maenadic as loss of self in the Dionysus-inspired collective. Brady's reflections on this understanding of how we had interpreted Agave in the 2015 performance of *Before* led to *Here She Comes*, which continued to develop the character in this direction (Brady, interview).

A fifty-minute spoken word piece described by Brady as an 'epic poem,' *Here She Comes* tells the story of Agave before, during, and after the events of *The Bacchae*, and is ultimately about cycles of Agave losing and recovering her identity. It was intended for performance by a single actor, who switches between an omniscient narrator, Agave herself, and occasionally Pentheus, alongside live musical accompaniment; Vivienne Youel worked with Brady to compose the music and played live in all of the performances. The fringe context remained

when it was produced: it was performed in what was operating as a gallery but had recently been converted from a shop unit on a busy high street; as a result, performances were limited to small audiences of up to twenty-five at a time. The one-woman show is also, of course, a quintessential form of fringe theatre. This change in space and added emphasis on Brady established the conditions for a different emphasis on the material than with *Before*. The urban space of a south London shop unit contrasted the academic spaces of Senate House and the Boilerhouse auditorium, which reflected a shift from challenging academic notions of authenticity to re-telling a woman's story in her own voice. Brady's solo delivery further compounded this.

Much of the early development for *Here She Comes* took place outside of the rehearsal room as Brady researched, drafted, and re-drafted the text.<sup>110</sup> Brady's notebooks from this stage of the process clearly indicate that, alongside her experience working on *Before*, *Here She Comes* is the product of several intersecting influences. The initial poem Brady wrote in response to 'I' indicates the immediate impression Agave left on her. Various drafts of this are preserved in one of Brady's notebooks; indicative are lines such as

The rule of man is over. The time has come to look to the other –  
Here she comes, re-born fresh from flesh fuelled blood of fallen  
men,  
Born from ribs of violent bones laid in ash,  
Their bodies now burnt – she takes that rib + moves along, she lays  
in love with the land (Notebook A, n.p.)

The poem describes the violent epiphany of a powerful woman coincident with the overthrow of patriarchal authority and underpinned by a close connection to the earth. It implies a radical, triumphal reading of the violent events in *The Bacchae*. As can be gathered from the reference to

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<sup>110</sup> Brady has given me access to her various notebooks so as to give me an insight into this part of the process; I have supplemented this with an interview.

Eve, the poem moves beyond Agave's origins in ancient Greek culture specifically to express a wider impulse to reclaim the transgressiveness of many women in the modern cultural imagination. This is aligned with a feminist refutation of an androcentric canon. In this way, the poem is a statement of Brady's aesthetic and political motivations as an artist (interview). Although never intended for performance, it nevertheless serves to indicate the aesthetics and politics that informed *Here She Comes* as it developed.

After deciding to develop her initial poem into a more extended piece, Brady undertook wide-ranging research. These included further investigation into *The Bacchae*, reading several different translations and adaptations, as well as into related themes such as the symbolic resonances of the classical elements and the psychological impact of motherhood (Brady, Notebook A; interview). This latter focus led Brady to what she describes as the single most influential piece of reading she did outside of Euripides' play: Polly Clark's account of becoming a mother, published in the *Guardian* in March 2017 (interview). Although Brady had written much of the material by the time she came across Clark's article, it helped to sharpen the poem's focus as it was redrafted and edited (ibid.). The article documents the ways in which Clark felt traumatised by the experience of giving birth to her only child, comparing it to the experience of warfare, and how she struggled to reassert her identity in the face of feeling that she was merely a vessel. For Brady, who is not a mother, the article provided an experience through which to filter her understanding of Agave's predicament: tellingly, in one of the first quotations from the article that Brady records in her notebook, Clark writes that after giving birth she 'was not in the world as [she] knew it previously.' Clark goes on to write about how motherhood caused her to vacate 'the space [she] once occupied,' effacing her 'dangerously well-developed sense of self.' This perception of a self being destroyed by the reduction of the body to a biological function



greatly informed Brady's depiction of Agave, who struggles to cope as Pentheus marginalises her more and more. Clark's suggestion that the 'madness' she felt after giving birth was an attempt to escape the monotony of her life as a baby-caring machine also colours Agave's temptation by Dionysus. Finally, the article's ten-year retrospective on Clark's experience, alongside her suggestion that the escape many women pursue after childbirth is 'flirt[ing] with drinking too much,' provided Brady with a narrative frame: an alcoholic Agave living alone in exile after Pentheus' death, reflecting back on the events that led to where she is now (Brady, Notebook B).

The way in which Clark tempered Brady's writing is clear throughout *Here She Comes*. The fearsome arrival of a powerful woman visible in Brady's initial poem transformed into an attempt to recover an identity lost through an oppressive experience of motherhood. One sequence in which this is especially clear is the appearance of the titular phrase, which is featured in a different way than in Brady's initial poem. After describing how Agave's slow temptation by Dionysus is triggered by Pentheus continuing to shut her out of his life, Brady depicts Agave finally succumbing to her desires: 'She moves her feet. And here / she comes, / to that second last step on the stair that / creaks. A final moment in the doorway / before she leaves' (*Here She Comes*).<sup>111</sup> This is quickly followed by a rapid sequence of images and feelings as she runs from domesticity into the wild:

A deep breath is taken before she takes flight,  
a breath so deep it stings in the night  
eyes wide lungs tight  
she reclaims her life.  
The salt taste in her mouth, the  
deafening blood pound- how's  
that for surround sound?!  
As if she had found desire!

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<sup>111</sup> Note that all of my quotations from *Here She Comes* are taken from the prompt copy used in 2017. Brady has since reformatted the text, making changes to some of the line breaks; this most recent version can be found in Appendix C.

As if she was 16 again  
with Echion's breeding  
laid on her back brought  
to her knees  
the kisses in this breeze are sweeter than that.  
Better than any physical gratification  
no complications,  
limbs free to blaze  
under  
no man's gaze  
she's under the stars  
led by constellations.  
The air smells damp  
the earth it moans it  
groans to her, it heats  
her bones.  
Damp in the night as the  
moon lights the night  
greeted by Nix<sup>112</sup> as she  
leaves her home.  
Into the woods she goes- and  
she's finally alone. (ibid.)

Whereas Brady's initial invocation of 'here she comes' is a violent epiphany, in the final piece it becomes the turning point for the rediscovery of a pre-maternal identity. At the same time, it remains a triumphant escape from the ubiquitous male gaze that contributed to her state of oppression (this point is embellished later in the poem). The sequence also demonstrates the influence of Haines' work on *Before*: as in 'I,' this moment of transformation is analogous to Agave's journey from city to mountain, as she crosses both psychological and material thresholds. In this way, her embrace of maenadism is a reification of that same desire to escape that Clark suggests postnatal women often feel, what Brady describes as Agave going 'beyond the self' (Notebook B).

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<sup>112</sup> Brady's spelling of Nyx (Νυξ), the primordial Greek personification of night.

Brady's decision to make her developing poem a piece geared toward performance coincided with the company's plans to collaborate with the Gallery on the Corner. Our initial plans for this collaboration included a further reworking of *Before. Here She Comes* fulfilled that function. Brady presented it to the company as an 'epic poem' that recontextualised Agave in the tradition of solo-delivered epic poetry.<sup>113</sup> Her notes on the piece's structure reflect a desire to imagine Agave as an epic hero as much as a tragic one (Brady, Notebook B). Brady built the piece around a structure of exile–journey–return, imagining Agave as on a quest to 'find change in her own life' (ibid.). Brady made it clear to us, however, that her impulse towards epic form was tempered by her own voice as a spoken word poet. In our interview, Brady discussed the influence of Kate Tempest, whose work combines ancient myth with modern culture. In particular, Tempest's classically influenced *Brand New Ancients* (published in 2013) shaped the way Brady sought to engage with *The Bacchae*. Both the interest in epic and Tempest's brand of spoken word poetry emphasise the importance of orality to *Here She Comes*: like *Brand New Ancients*, it is a story designed to be told with live music, and its solo recitation is key to how its themes are transmitted. This was clear throughout the rehearsal process and in the final performances: Youel and Brady responded to one another in each performance, altering the material in subtle ways in each show. The text itself also shifted, with Brady often improvising in small, unexpected places during a given performance. Thus, even though a written text of *Here She Comes* exists, it does not provide a definitive account of what occurred in any single performance. Furthermore, the combination of epic structure, mythological narrative, and

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<sup>113</sup> Brady is not necessarily referring to Homeric epic when she talks about *Here She Comes* as an 'epic poem'; rather, she is referencing solo-delivered poetic texts centred on heroic individuals more generally. Nevertheless, Brady's desire to stake a claim for Agave as a mythological figure with a compelling arc does evoke and subvert the androcentric narratives of Homer. In more recent work, Brady has engaged directly with Homer, re-writing Andromache's story as part of By Jove's project *Homer's Women* (2018, see Plastow).

spoken word form emphasises the interweaving of ancient and modern that characterises *Here She Comes*, allowing Brady to imagine Dionysus as a genuine deity that interacts with humans, but also for Agave to be understood as a modern woman.

After Brady brought *Here She Comes* to the group, we programmed it as part of our season at the Gallery rather than *Before*. Aside from pragmatic reasons – both *Margaret of Anjou* and *Medea* were more demanding in terms of the number of people needed – this programming decision was made because we saw *Here She Comes* as not only a response to Haines' Agave in 'I' but as continuing to develop our reading of *The Bacchae* that we began with *Before*. Although Brady was the dominant creative force on *Here She Comes*, placing it amidst our season framed it as part of the company's output (the decision to programme it rather than *Before* was made collectively). A number of important elements from *Before* were carried over into *Here She Comes*, and this was reinforced by the advisory role many of the company members had in the rehearsal process. Prominent among these is the notion of an 'ideology of freedom' that Brady took from the devising process of *Before* (Notebook B). In *Here She Comes* this is understood as Dionysus' promise to allow Agave to embrace a new identity that liberates her, but one that ultimately reaffirms her oppression. Brady notes that Agave 'wants change but doesn't know what or how'; the Dionysiac offers her the means she needs (ibid.). The text Brady took into rehearsal suggested that Dionysus exists as an independent deity in the world of the piece. During rehearsals, however, we sought to find a way to communicate this so that both Pentheus and Dionysus could be seen as emerging from Agave's psyche, with one as an expression of her oppression and the other as an expression of her desperation to escape. At one rehearsal attended by Haines and I, we suggested the use of a microphone – we thought this might help distinguish Pentheus' voice, the magnified sound evoking both the hollowness of such a

representation and the overwhelming nature of his privileged position over Agave. Brady experimented with this and eventually took up the suggestion for the performances. In fact, she embellished the idea, adding in a sequence where Dionysus' ecstatic effect was also spoken into the microphone, creating a performed slippage between the two male figures that Agave is caught between.

One area that I and the other advising By Jove members had a major role in was the design of the piece. This also represented an extrapolation of *Before*. Royal Holloway lecturer and theatre-maker Libby Worth, who had seen *Before* in 2015, had previously suggested we play further with the materiality of soil should we develop the piece; this is what we set out to do in *Here She Comes* (Worth). Rather than containing the soil in a sandbox, we filled the majority of the gallery with it so that the smell filled the space and that audiences were forced to cross a threshold of their own when they arrived, moving from the noisy street outside to the improbable 'forest' within. Buried in and placed around the soil were objects from Agave's life: clothes for her and for Pentheus, empty wine bottles, a suitcase, chests of drawers, lamps, and – most prominently – a dilapidated sofa with plants growing out of it. These were interspersed with a variety of plants and flat logs. The inspiration for this design was the idea of Agave's two worlds – domestic and wild – collapsed into one. As Brady moved through the space during the performance, her interactions with the soil, plants, and objects were intended to shift the audience's understanding of which world she occupies while maintaining an awareness that the other world continues to co-exist.

On reflection, the design decisions made by Brady, myself, and the other company members had a major impact, helping to transform Brady from an actor playing a character into a storyteller. For the audience, entering the space became an event in itself, the performance

conditions already present. At the beginning of the show, audience members were invited to seat themselves on the 'forest floor': the logs and the soil. Brady and Youel then appeared and joined the audience, with Brady beginning the performance on the sofa looking out to the assembled listeners. At one level, this was designed to evoke a notion of telling stories around a campfire, with Youel's live guitar music adding to this atmosphere. In retrospect, however, the effect might have gone further. In each performance, the relatively small group of audience members joined with Brady in experiencing the story of a woman who feels marginalised, seeks a new identity, and ends up suffering. Unlike *Before*, where the audience were purely spectators surrounding the contained soil, in *Here She Comes* they were implicitly invited to participate in Agave's journey. They were able to feel and smell the soil. Each audience member was offered wine and drank with Agave as she embraced Dionysus. At the end, when Brady was on her knees in the centre of the space as the crumpled post-murder Agave, the distinction between audience and performer was reduced to bare minimum for those sitting on the floor, as they found Brady/Agave with them amongst the soil. The handful of reviews *Here She Comes* received seemed to indicate that, for some audience members at least, a sense of community was palpable. Amy Russell wrote, for example:

...when I found the venue, I was met by fresh earth inside, with cushions and logs scattered around, vaguely facing a very battered looking sofa dwarfed by a fern. Around it was scattered debris. So we seated ourselves on the ground around the sofa, there was something unifying about it, I started talking to the total strangers around us. And there was always the faint smell of the earth we sat on. ... From the first syllable we were utterly caught. The opening was a strange, discordant blend of modern and ancient that set the story in every age. ... During the performance wine was offered to everyone, in mismatched crockery. I think I had a milk jug. The rich scent of the red wine, the earth and the music and use of sounds grounded the audience in the story. Utterly swept along with the storyteller. I could barely remember how to speak at the

end of the performance, returning to myself felt quite strange.  
(*Sabotage Reviews*)<sup>114</sup>

In this way, *Here She Comes* reconfigured the relationship between performer and audience. For those who felt like Russell, connecting with Brady during the experience enabled them to participate in the story rather than spectate her performance, a shift that is cognate with By Jove's reframing of *The Bacchae* around Agave rather than Pentheus.

Orality played a crucial role in this process of bringing together the audience and establishing Agave's epic credentials. Combining narration and multiple voices from *The Bacchae* in one body and rearticulating the story as a solo-delivered piece also advanced the feminist politics of both By Jove's previous reading of Euripides' play and Brady as an artist in her own right. This was particularly apparent in the sequence Brady called 'To Kill My Son the Lion' (*Here She Comes*). The title is borrowed from Woodward's poem in *Before*. While the sequence was previously split between two distinct bodies, in *Here She Comes* the shifting between the narrator and Agave in Brady's solo performance recreated the ambiguity as to how aware Agave was of what she was doing:

... An  
intruder keeping his presence  
unknown  
but she sees beyond  
and catches a glimpse of  
that lion's throat.  
I knew I wasn't alone.  
This one has to go.

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<sup>114</sup> Elsewhere, Chris Omaweng wrote, '[t]his production ... is certainly atmospheric, using the performance space incredibly well to create a real sense of the outdoors. It was as though this were a campfire story being told, by the show's narrator, SJ Brady' (*LondonTheatre1*). Tom Bolton noted the shift in worlds from outside to inside: '[b]ehind a curtained Tooting Bec shop front, barely separated from traffic and curious passers-by, an ancient drama unfolds.' Even Charlotte Irwin from *A Younger Theatre*, who complained about not being comfortable, intimated the creation of a community atmosphere in her opening section about the audience sat around the soil and logs.

Bring me the head.  
Thinking he's the king?  
Swanning in all proud  
and believing  
his sleek lion's mane can  
keep him safe  
in these woods  
where now only women remain?  
I'll show you lion hear  
me roar!  
Bigger and braver than  
I ever was before.  
Agave leads.  
*Bring me the head.*  
She calls to her tribe  
to bring that Lion down from the  
inside- take his crown!  
Tear down the tree  
rip through vines  
rhythmic frenzy  
With only one thing in their mind  
to pull limb from limb with their  
own freedom to win. (ibid., emphasis in original)

Presented in one body, multiple voices allow the death of Pentheus to be both a direct experience and an event narrated to the audience simultaneously, both maddened hallucination against a lion and outright attack against a man. This is further nuanced by the fact that earlier in the piece, the narrator refers to Pentheus as 'the lion howling alone,' suggesting 'lion' as an epithet that symbolically invokes his status as patriarchal oppressor. In this way, Agave and the maenads' 'rhythmic frenzy' cannot be easily separated from their desire to win 'their own freedom' and prove themselves as equal in might to the king/beast. Moreover, because of the continuity between Brady as narrator and as Agave, the event is understood in the context of a woman recounting a story rather than as any kind of realistic mimetic representation. Thus the full story as told by Brady comes to modify the way Agave's actions are framed. As with *Before*,



the effect is to try to deny any simple moralising or rationalising understanding of what happens in *The Bacchae*.

If *Here She Comes* is to be seen as a further iteration of By Jove's work on *The Bacchae*, then the emphasis on storytelling, as well as the decision to bring the audience into Agave's world rather than positioning them outside of it, served to demystify the visually and textually codified *Before*. Euripides' play remained an informing text for those aware of it, but Agave's story was here conveyed on its own terms, and in the voice of a woman as writer and performer. It continued to develop a feminist reading of the play: it further challenged the association between women and the irrational emblematised by Euripides' Agave, exploring this association within the experience of modern women in a culture that marginalises them. Although produced under By Jove's name and influenced by the past and present practice of the company, *Here She Comes* was also identifiably the work of a single woman. The dual ownership of the piece is important to consider here. As a member of By Jove – indeed, our co-artistic director – Brady was as inextricably connected to her labour as she was in *Before*. In having such a major role, however, her individual profile as a theatre-maker was emphasised. In other words, Brady embodied the company as much as the company represented her. In a piece about a woman's loss of self amidst a theoretically liberating collective identity, it is especially important for the women involved in the producing company not to become 'lost' in the assertion of collective authorship – that is, alienated from their labour or exploited in the process of providing their labour. In ensuring that the individual and collective identities authoring the piece were in harmony with one another, *Here She Comes* resolutely avoided this.

Yet, what does it mean for a feminist theatre company structured around an egalitarian ensemble to be represented by a single figure with all but a monopoly on creative agency on the

project? On one level, it is not especially problematic, partly because it is so incredibly rare in British theatre for this figure to be a woman. (It is significant that it occurred within a fringe context, where greater opportunities are afforded to women to have creative agency within a company and on an individual production.) But as a piece that emerged from *Before*, a project that consciously situated itself in a genealogy of feminist engagement with *The Bacchae* that is notable for an emphasis on polyvocality, *Here She Comes* is striking in further reducing the voice of maenadic experience to a singular one, and the authors behind that voice to just one (or two including Youel). One of the distinguishing features of the maenad is collectivity, and women-centric productions such as *A Mouthful of Birds* and Kneehigh's have addressed this through ensemble groups of performers, multiple creatives shaping the ensemble's material, and an emphasis on diverse identities among the maenads. *Before* replicated these approaches but in a reduced fashion as a result of pragmatic demands. Although *Here She Comes* also drew on this genealogy, it ultimately broke from it by focusing on an individual voice – of a writer/performer and of a character – as the creative crux through which the production's meanings were shaped. In this way, the piece exemplifies the fourth wave feminist emphasis on the individual over the collective as a means of exploring issues of agency, choice, and empowerment.

If Brady's virtuoso presence as writer and performer determined how meaning was shaped in the performance, from her physical presence down to the uniquely live aspects of her interplay with Youel and the fluctuation of her text through improvisation, then this is just one way in which the fringe context of the production was crucial. The one-woman show, a recognisable form of fringe theatre, framed the proceedings. The production's choice and use of space reconfigured the relationship between storyteller and audience in a way that shifted spectatorship towards participation. It would be difficult to do this in a more conventional

performance space, as we have discovered in the process of developing plans for a national tour.<sup>115</sup> But while *Here She Comes* may have emphasised the individual over the collective, the power dynamics within By Jove's fringe-style structure also facilitated Brady's work. Myself, Haines, and the other company members provided the inspiration for *Here She Comes* with our work for *Before* and, by continuing to collaborate together, supported the realisation of *Here She Comes* through our labour. In other words, there is a correlation between the power structures of a production and the kind of work that is produced. This is particularly important to bear in mind when approaching the chapter's final case study.

### **Liberation or Ventriloquism? Lazarus Theatre Company (2016)**

Rachel Agustsson	Performer, 'Chorus 5'	First engagement
Amy Allen	Performer, 'Chorus 3'	First engagement
Will Beeston	Production graphic designer	Regular collaborator
Ina Berggren	Production manager	First engagement
Mel Berry	Stage manager (present at production meetings)	First engagement
Nick Biadon	Performer, 'Dionysus'	First engagement
David Bullen	Dramaturg (present at production meetings)	First engagement
Tamara Camacho	Performer, 'Chorus 1'	First engagement

<sup>115</sup> By Jove's plans for the tour are ongoing, but *Here She Comes* has been performed twice in full since the original run: once at a celebration of By Jove's seventh birthday in 2018, and again at the APGRD in Oxford as part of the 2019 postgraduate symposium. It is no coincidence that both of these occasions offered similar performance conditions to the original production.

Sorcha Corcoran	Designer (present at production meetings)	Regular collaborator
Ricky Dukes	Artistic director, producer (present at production meetings)	Founder and artistic director
Stephen Emery	Performer, 'Pentheus'	Previously engaged
Jake W Francis	Performer, 'Advisor'	First engagement
Stuart Glover	Lighting designer (present at production meetings)	Regular collaborator
Gavin Harrington-Odedra	Director and adapter (present at production meetings)	Associate director
Ashley Holman	Performer, 'Advisor'	First engagement
Kenzie Horn	Performer, 'Chorus 4'	First engagement
Neil McKeown	Sound designer (present at production meetings)	Regular collaborator
Liis Mikk	Performer, 'Chorus 2'	First engagement
Katherine Judkins	Performer, 'Chorus 6'	First engagement
John King	Assistant director	First engagement
Sara Reimers	Advisor (present at production meetings)	Associate director
RJ Seeley	Performer, 'Chorus Leader'	Previously engaged
Adam Trigg	Photographer	Company photographer
Aidan Valentine	Performer, 'Advisor'	First engagement
Lysanne Van Overbeek	Performer, 'Katrine'	First engagement

Sonja Zobel	Performer, 'Agaue'	First engagement
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Table 4. People involved in Lazarus' *The Bacchae*, their main roles on the project, and their relationship to the company.

Founded in 2007 by artistic director Ricky Dukes, Lazarus are a highly respected fringe company that consistently receive acclaim for their productions of canonical texts. They are not explicitly committed to feminist politics in their theatre-making, but their work generally aims to be progressive. They have a record of excellence in achieving a gender balance in their work: as of 2017, they have averaged a 50:50 casting ratio of men to women across ten years of their work. On three occasions they have staged productions with a cast of only women (Sophocles' *Electra* in 2011, *Women of Troy* in 2012, and *Henry V* in 2015). Moreover, as Schafer and Reimers (an associate director for Lazarus) have recently discussed, the company have 'a history of exploring and expanding the depiction of femininity within the classical canon' (4). Schafer and Reimers make a compelling case for what they describe as the feminist dramaturgy of Lazarus' 2013 production of *The Tragedy of Mariam* by Elizabeth Carey, something that was driven by the project's director (and Lazarus' other associate director) Gavin Harrington-Odedra. This was supported by a women-heavy cast and creative team: of the fifteen people involved with the project, only two were men, including the director. Lazarus' 2016 production of *The Bacchae*, also directed by Harrington-Odedra, followed in a similar vein. It featured a predominantly female cast (nine women, six men), took the unusual step of reimagining Cadmus as Pentheus' wife rather than grandfather, and sought to give the women of the chorus a voice in the production via a devising process. In contrast to *The Tragedy of Mariam*, however, the creative team was predominantly male. I was one of those men, working on the production as a dramaturg.

While Lazarus are a fringe company, they differ from By Jove in a number of ways that are pertinent to the discussion here. Whereas By Jove are organised as a group of regularly collaborating artists, each of whom have an equal stake in the company, Lazarus have a hierarchical structure more akin to an institutional model: a single artistic director holds the greatest stake in the company, followed by permanent associate directors, and then an ensemble of performers, designers, assistant directors, and stage managers that changes with each production. Lazarus do collaborate regularly with some individuals, but a glance through the company's online archive quickly reveals the extent to which performers join the company for a single production in the majority of cases (Lazarus, 'Past Productions...'; 'Pre-2016'). As such, although each production is presented under the auspices of 'Lazarus Theatre Company,' that company is constantly shifting in its makeup, with only Dukes, Reimers, and Harrington-Odedra remaining fixed. Performers acting with the company are thus engaged in a manner more akin to a mainstream producing house than to a fringe collective; in other words, a one-time 'hire' with no long-term stake in the company's future.

This model has proved highly successful for Lazarus, facilitating their prolific output of over thirty full-scale productions in just over a decade. In the process it has allowed them to engage hundreds of actors (including a large number of women), many of whom are recent graduates: these actors receive valuable experience as part of an expertly-led ensemble even if they are not remunerated for their labour.<sup>116</sup> Maintaining a permanent acting ensemble on the

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<sup>116</sup> It is my understanding that Lazarus committed to always paying their artists from 2017 onward, when they began their ongoing residency at the Greenwich Theatre in south London. Prior to this, they worked on a profit share model, whereby any profits from a production are shared among all those who were involved after it has closed. This was the case for *The Bacchae*, though the production ultimately made a loss.

London fringe is unsustainable, as By Jove found out within just over a year of setting up.<sup>117</sup> It would also restrict Lazarus' capacity to produce work as frequently as they do. This relates to a second distinction from By Jove: Lazarus' proclivity towards regular full-scale productions in designated theatre spaces such as the Tristan Bates Theatre in Covent Garden, the Greenwich Theatre, or the Blue Elephant Theatre in Camberwell, where *The Bacchae* was performed. These spaces allow Lazarus to produce runs of at least three weeks. This greatly contrasts with By Jove: increasingly we prefer to work with found spaces, and we rarely produce runs of longer than a week. As fringe theatre-makers, however, both Lazarus and By Jove have in common the experience of needing to be pragmatic about the work produced, being adaptable and flexible in the face of minimal budgets.

Lazarus' production of *The Bacchae* was produced in a three-week, devising-heavy rehearsal process. These sessions were led by Harrington-Odedra and attended by assistant director John King; myself and stage manager Mel Berry were also often present. Regular production meetings chaired by Dukes were held during this period. These became the main point of contact between those designated as 'creative team' – producers, directors, designers, and so on – and the cast, as represented by Harrington-Odedra and King. In a further replication of institutional theatre structures, a sharp divide was imposed between cast and creative team; meetings of the latter were held after rehearsals or during lunch breaks, with the cast not permitted to attend. (I recall an occasion when an actor entered the room having forgotten his bag; the production meeting was paused until the actor left.) These meetings grew

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<sup>117</sup> Our original intention was to establish such an ensemble in the manner of the Théâtre du Soleil. After just two productions on the costly London fringe scene, however, we realised that our sources of funding were not sufficient enough to maintain this model. As a result, we converted to our present structure of a small group of regularly collaborating artists with project-by-project funding.

more fraught as rehearsals progressed, with the creative team struggling to follow the idiosyncrasies of the devising-based approach Harrington-Odedra had adopted. This reflected a source of discontinuity that ran throughout the production, whereby Harrington-Odedra sought to create a more-or-less egalitarian rehearsal room in which the cast as well as creative team members were able to contribute to the work while Dukes anticipated a hierarchical approach, expecting top down decisions to be made. As such, exchanges would take place in which Harrington-Odedra wished to make decisions organically produced by the ensemble while Dukes wanted Harrington-Odedra to make his own choices (which is understandable from the perspective of Dukes' position as producer). What to do with *The Bacchae* was at the heart of this struggle: Dukes seemed to expect something closely resembling Euripides' play while Harrington-Odedra was seeking to innovate.

The maenads were Harrington-Odedra's main interest. This was apparent from my first meeting with Harrington-Odedra and Dukes several weeks before rehearsals began. As Harrington-Odedra later told Greg Jameson in an interview:

[a]t the heart of the play are the Bacchae. Regardless of the machinations of a god, or the fighting of a mortal ruler, the Bacchae are what they are fighting over. They are inseparable from either man's power. I want us to follow the journey of the Bacchae, see the appeal of being a Bacchae, to want to be one and then question whether we would have been susceptible to their power to be part of their final act (Harrington-Odedra)

This suited the company's ensemble focus as well as Harrington-Odedra's own experience with devising as a way of making theatre. Initially it was suggested that the chorus might be cast as a mix of men and women, but in my early conversations with Harrington-Odedra I sought to point out the importance of maenads as women to the play's dramaturgy and to the Dionysiac



cult. In a list of quotations about *The Bacchae* that I was asked to provide, I included material from Froma Zeitlin's *Playing the Other*, Jennifer March's essay 'Euripides the Misogynist?' and *A Mouthful of Birds*. My aim was to orient the cast and creative team to the idea that interpreting *The Bacchae* as a play in which women have a major stake is not only a valid approach but one with a rich history. This list of quotations along with other notes I provided joined the documents that were posted on the walls of the rehearsal room; as such, the assertion that women matter to the play became a physical part of the environment in which Lazarus' version was produced. Harrington-Odedra also ultimately changed how he cast the production: seven women were cast as a chorus of maenads, with three men cast as Pentheus' advisors; Harrington-Odedra envisaged that these advisors would eventually all join Dionysus as the play progressed.<sup>118</sup>

The devising process began with sessions described as 'unleashing your inner Bacchae' (Lazarus Theatre Company, Rehearsal Schedule). I was unable to be present for these workshops, but as assistant director John King recorded on Lazarus' blog: '[w]e've been exploring the world of the Bacchae through physicalisation and discussion, playing with ideas of the 'Bacchic' and its opposites; considering both freedom and obedience, release and constraint' (*The Bacchae* congregate...). As such, the process began with an attempt to explore what it meant to be a maenad and worship Dionysus, all the while seeking to let the cast bond. The contribution of the cast to this collective understanding of maenadic experience was further emphasised when Harrington-Odedra asked each chorus member to write a monologue from the perspective of their individual maenad (King, Rehearsal Log). In practice, this involved them

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<sup>118</sup> In the event, the chorus leader, played by RJ Seeley, began as a female advisor to Pentheus and became the first to 'convert.'

crystallising their experience of the early physical workshops with material I had provided about the ancient world. These monologues were then incorporated into the play as replacements for Euripides' choral odes, becoming 'spotlights' designed to acknowledge the individual experience of each woman. In addition, monologues written by the performers playing Agave and Katrine (the curiously non-Greek name Harrington-Odedra gave to Pentheus' wife) supplemented translated Euripidean material in the final scene. Lazarus' textual engagement with *The Bacchae* was thus characterised by a combination of Euripides (in Philip Vellacott's 1954 translation) with new material produced by the cast through devising activities. For the most part, the Euripidean material provided the text for Dionysus and his encounters with Pentheus, and the cast provided the text for the women of the play.<sup>119</sup> The division of new and old text between different characters emphasises Harrington-Odedra's interest in the Dionysiac as maenadic experience. The fact that the male advisors were also asked to generate a monologue indicates, however, that this interest was not exclusively concerned with female experience.

Both the chorus and the advisors were asked to respond to the same question: why did you join the bacchae? The women responded enthusiastically to the task, seeing it as an opportunity to express their own voice in the context of classical drama; as one chorus member, Amy Allen, wrote on Lazarus' blog, 'there are not many opportunities to have your own voice heard through you actually being able to write a part of the play' ('Day Seven...'). When the first drafts of these speeches came to be presented to the creative team, however, there were some questions raised by this group as to both the content and the quality. Perhaps unsurprisingly

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<sup>119</sup> This was not exclusively the case as new text was also given to male characters. Harrington-Odedra wrote a scene between Pentheus and his advisors (including Katrine) that replaced the Cadmus–Teiresias–Pentheus scene in Euripides' play, and each advisor also wrote a monologue charting a conversion to the Dionysiac.

given the shared experience of the cast in developing ideas early on, many of the monologues were generalised statements of being ecstatically released by Dionysus and embracing his lifestyle. Nevertheless, there were some indications of individuality: for example, one actor imagined their maenad fleeing an abusive relationship. I offered to work with the actors to help them re-draft their monologues. Consequently I sat with each member of the chorus to discuss the ideas that underpinned their writing, helped rewrite it by expanding on these ideas, and then worked with Harrington-Odedra to fit the new monologue into the piece. Emerging from the chorus' general understanding of maenadism as linked to oppressive social conditions, the monologues became more clearly about such topics as: escaping oppressive and controlling partners; the pleasure of dancing; escape from marriage; subverting gendered behaviour; contrasting the oppressiveness of urban environments with the freedom afforded by nature; escaping loneliness; and giving the self over to frenzy.

Allen's monologue provides an instructive example of how each actor's personal experience shaped their understanding of what Dionysiac liberation would feel like. It is worth quoting the piece in full in order to convey the overall intended effect:

Realistically, he'd say. I'd tell him what happened in my day and he'd say 'good story, tell it again'. I'd give our little one a kiss when she grazed her knee and he'd say 'don't be so soft'. I'd argue with dad and he'd say 'what a prick' but not about him but about me. He'd called me boozy. He'd say you can't handle your drink. He'd say 'that's not who you are, love'. He'd say 'you're such a potty mouth I don't like that'. He'd say 'it makes you sound crude, it makes you sound unladylike, would you catch my mum saying that?'

And actually, I'd say

My mum taught me how to swear, actually

So, realistically, you need to stick it.

And now he'll never speak to me that way again

He'll never patronise me or belittle me or disrespect me or say to me no, you can't

Because I've a power of a god, actually. This god sees what's inside of me and he knows that I'm made of more than what any man might make me. This god makes me, me. And I'm gonna celebrate who I am as loudly as I like and no one is gonna stop that. Because this power makes me feel good, actually. And what's good will always be loved. And what's good will never be beaten. So you can chain us and gag us but that won't work. You can't beat Dionysus, and you can't beat us. (Lazarus Theatre Company, *The Bacchae* 19-20)

When I worked with Allen, I asked her what she found most frustrating about previous male partners, picking up on an element of her initial draft. She talked about how infuriating she found small, repeated phrases used by one partner, phrases she identified as trying to police her behaviour in accordance with gender norms. This informed the content of the second draft. Allen, who is from Newcastle and speaks with a Geordie accent, also talked about how her perception that classical material requires delivery in received pronunciation alienated her from such texts; we thus aimed to create something that felt natural spoken in Allen's own voice.

As a result of each chorus member's input in shaping their monologue, the speeches came to express a variety of experiences with Dionysus. During rehearsals this engendered discussion amongst the cast about the feminism of the maenads and, as a result, of *The Bacchae* as a play. One of the chorus, Kenzie Horn, wrote on the Lazarus blog to say that '[t]oday we had an interesting discussion about whether [sic] or not *The Bacchae* is a feminist play. Personally, I believe wholeheartedly that it is. ... The play has a lot to say about gender politics, and its message is still very relevant to today's society' ('Day Ten...'). As Horn's account suggests, a number of the chorus members had come to directly equate feminism with Dionysiac liberation. Others expressed their concern at this, given the conservative narrative of *The Bacchae* – we did not want to promote an anti-feminist message. In an effort to resolve this dilemma, Harrington-Odedra and I continued to work on the speeches and their placement in the piece so that they

would chart a loss of individuality as collective identity took over. This would then parallel a shift from experiences of a Dionysiac liberation that correlates with feminist aspirations to experiences where that liberation is more problematic. Such a structure also served to mirror the descent into violence in Dionysus and Pentheus' story.

A comparison between Allen's monologue, heard early on in the piece, with Liis Mikk's speech – positioned as the penultimate chorus speech and heard shortly before Pentheus' death – demonstrates Harrington-Odedra and I's intended arc. Her speech was as follows, again reproduced in full to give a sense of the contrast:

A good fried breakfast. A soup and roll for lunch. Dinner was chicken, or pork, or – oh, yes, beef. Roast beef dripping when you take it from the oven, fatty and – when you cut into it – bloody. I love it bloody. A drink or two to accompany the meal. Afterwards, a strong coffee. Black. No milk thank you very much.  
My husband loved a leg of lamb. My eldest too. My youngest – he was a vegan. We weren't close. Still, they always got something special for birthdays. My husband never forgot our anniversary. A few years ago he got me a course on wine-tasting. I have to tell you, it was quite the experience.  
I loved living with them. I loved my husband. I loved my sons. I loved my house. But  
They're dead now  
And to be quite honest with you  
I don't love living with myself  
I'm happy to tell you, though, that I've found someone new. I've found someone who's better than bloody beef and black coffee and bottles of the best. In fact, he *is* a bottle of the best, but he never ends, and I've found that I don't end either. In fact, I don't know where I begin or where I end, but I know – I absolutely, unequivocally know – that I am and that I am his and now I've surrendered myself to him, I'll go on and on and on  
I belonged to me. But now  
I belong to Dionysus (Lazarus Theatre Company, *The Bacchae* 31-32; emphasis original)

This maenad's discomfort with an identity outside of a role as mother or wife stands in direct contrast to the speech made by Kenzie Horn's maenad earlier in the piece, who declared 'I belong to me' (5). The contrasting statement – 'I belong to Dionysus' – was immediately echoed by the final chorus speech, delivered by Katherine Judkins, who began '*we* belong to Dionysus' (32; emphasis mine). What started as liberating in a way that could be described as feminist became total ownership of the women as a group by a male authority figure, a moment which preceded the on-stage murder of Pentheus. To further problematise the association between Dionysiac liberation and feminism, Katrine was given a speech rebuking Dionysus in place of the god's *ex machina* pronouncements: 'this wasn't a revolution for the people. ... if Dionysus is a god – and I can't deny what I've seen – then I want better gods' (41). The piece therefore ended not with the mortal characters passively executing the god's divine will, but with a human woman's reassertion of the need to seek a progressive path to revolution rather than have recourse to Dionysus' easy, temporary, and violent liberation. As I wrote the text for Katrine's speech, this conclusion can be seen as a continuation of *By Jove's* engagement with Dionysus and liberation in *Before*, paralleling *Here She Comes'* continuation of Agave's story.

The material added by the cast, Harrington-Odedra, and I proved to be successful in orienting audiences to the feminist resonances of *The Bacchae*. The reviewer from *Views from the Gods* began their thoughts on the production by raising the question of whether Greek tragedy is misogynist or feminist; they conclude by the end of the review that Lazarus' *The Bacchae* was the latter – on the basis of Katrine's final monologue. Other reviews indicated in their response that the spotlight given to each chorus member successfully shifted focus onto them. Three reviews commented on the emphasis placed on the women.<sup>120</sup> Allen reported on

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<sup>120</sup> See Kopplin; Jameson; and Miller.

the Lazarus blog that when some acting students of hers attended the show, 'they were buzzing after seeing the performance- they enjoyed the individual monologues and felt it important that people from different regions, countries and of different "shapes and sizes" were represented together on stage. It sparked conversations and debates about Greek theatre and feminism ...' ('And into the run...'). In this sense, the Lazarus production not only brought maenadic experience to the fore but did so in a way that allowed a diverse range of women's experiences to be heard on stage. By situating these maenads as contemporary women, the production also managed to bring contemporary feminist debates into play as part of the narrative of *The Bacchae*. These centred on the notions of empowerment and agency that Rivers suggests are particular concerns of the fourth wave (24).

This reading came about as a result of feminist epistemology and practice, placing value on the women of the chorus, recognising the importance of them being represented by women in performance, and drawing on the lived experiences of women in the cast in order to mediate Euripides' representations of womanhood. On reflection, however, there is a question as to how much agency the women of the cast actually had in Lazarus' creative process: to what extent did they, in the final piece, 'have [their] own voice heard'? In one sense, the women of the chorus drew on their own experiences to help generate material that led to an arc, albeit a male-authored one, that questioned the relationship between women, Dionysus, and maenadism. In another, the process could be seen as offering the women a voice only to take it away again. I wrote above that Katrine 'was given' her speech because this is what occurred: I wrote the monologue as an alternative to the one devised by performer Lysanne Van Overbeek, and Harrington-Odedra decided to replace hers with mine. While the work I did with the chorus was much more collaborative, even with their monologues the final performed text contained

more of my words than theirs. The chorus speeches may have been informed by each actor's first draft, their own desire for an original voice, and their own lived experiences as women, but much of what they originally wrote was replaced with text that I produced. This outcome was in some ways a symptom of disciplinary exchange: I have experience and training as a writer, while the majority of the actors I was working with did not, so my role was to articulate their ideas in a theatrically engaging way. Nevertheless, in a show concerned with the agency of women within a male-led collective, a man putting words into these women's mouths – as part of a process that encouraged these women to think of those words as their own – is troubling. At best this might be seen as facilitating the realisation of these women's voices, at worst it is ventriloquism akin to the contradictions engendered by male creatives 'doing' (post)feminism discussed in the previous chapter.

The decision to replace Van Overbeek's speech with mine occurred as a result of the creative team's debates on what *The Bacchae* is about. Dukes and other team members wanted a firm answer as to the 'message' of the play. Drawing on my work with *By Jove*, the monologue I wrote sought to conclude the arc Harrington-Odedra and I had arranged with the chorus speeches. The call to replace the speech was thus a top down decision made by the creative team and imposed on the cast. This hierarchical power structure, while productive in many respects, further compounds the ways the female cast members' creative agency was undermined. Particularly troubling is the fact that the creative team, invested with so much decision-making power in comparison to the female-heavy cast, was dominated by men (see table 4).<sup>121</sup> Moreover, those on the creative team – Dukes, Harrington-Odedra, and (to a lesser extent)

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<sup>121</sup> There was only one woman on the creative team in a major role and two others present at crew meetings, compared to seven men. However, Mel Berry was not consulted on creative matters and Sara Reimers was unable to attend all crew meetings.



Reimers – had far greater ownership of the work being produced as the exclusive stakeholders of the company.

This raises the important question of who authored the production – and who was credited for doing so. The production was framed as Lazarus', but the women of the cast were not meaningfully part of that company label. In contrast to *Here She Comes*, where Brady embodied the company, the women of the Lazarus cast were subsumed as individual artists under a collective identity that did not ultimately represent them. Instead, it capitalised on their labour while neither paying them nor crediting their contributions to the final piece. Lazarus' website still has Euripides at the head of the list of the creative team – the credit is 'written by Euripides' – followed by Harrington-Odedra, credited as directing and adapting the play ('Pre-2016'). This emphasis on Euripides makes sense in a marketing context – and the marketing did indeed exploit this<sup>122</sup> – but it is concerning that the production was framed in a way that marginalised the women that played such a role in shaping what was ultimately presented. A credit noting 'additional material written by David Bullen and the company' was eventually added to the company's online archive, but only after the run had finished. Even so, that credit emphasises my contribution over the cast's.

As well as being influenced by feminist impulses, Lazarus' *The Bacchae* was facilitated by the context of being produced on the fringe stage. But while the production took advantage of the conditions afforded by the fringe – a group of people worked for free to create an experimental piece of work with a large number of women in the cast – it resisted its own

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<sup>122</sup> The main promotional image was of a headless Greek-style naked male statue with a black cross over its genitals, suggesting a naughty, iconoclastic approach, but one that had little to do with Harrington-Odedra's interest in maenadic experience. Of the three interviews with theatre websites organised by Dukes to promote the production, two were with the actor playing Dionysus (the other was with Harrington-Odedra).

fringeness in other ways. The way the production utilised space, with the audience end-on in a studio theatre, is one manifestation of this anti-fringe element to Lazarus' production. The division of power into a strict hierarchy (and Lazarus' position as the ultimate beneficiary of the production's success) is another, replicating the conditions of mainstream institutional theatres. The fact that the women of the cast were divested of creative agency in a production singled out by at least some reviewers and audiences for its feminism recalls the entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist elements characteristic of a postfeminist sensibility. Lazarus' production thus effectively points to the potential gap that can open up between performances that prominently feature women on stage but not in the creation of the piece, and those in which women are involved at every level of production. The company demonstrate that even progressive intentions within a theatre-making context optimised to do things differently to the mainstream are limited in their efficacy if these intentions are enacted without gender equality at a structural level.

Harrington-Odedra sought to place an emphasis on the voice of the maenads. But, ultimately, whose voice was it that was heard? Just as in *The Bacchae* there is a question as to whether Dionysus' possession of Theban women makes them little more than his puppets, here there is the issue of male directors and dramaturgs making female performers their mouthpieces. Of course, the situation is more complex than that. The women of the chorus were able to invest in the characterisation of their maenad with aspects of their own biography and passions. All of the work I did was carried out alongside each individual performer – a process of negotiation and experimentation. They consented to the use of their (fictionalised) personal stories. As the quotations above indicate, at least some of the group found this to be a rewarding way to work. Allen's comment is particularly instructive: the chorus' writing and shaping of

their own material provided an opportunity for them to achieve a sense of ownership and connection with classical drama. As such, based on the performance alone, Lazarus' production offered one of the clearest instances of maenadism becoming a means of expressing a range of women's emancipatory experiences since Kneehigh in 2004. As laudable as this is – and I do think it is significant – it is only part of the picture. A look at the process of creating the production makes the problematic gendered power relations apparent. It is crucial to acknowledge and confront the juxtaposition of empowering women in the live-text and divesting them of agency in the process of creating that live-text, especially given the subject matter of *The Bacchae*.

### **Untangling Postfeminisms on the Fringe**

At the beginning of this chapter, I referenced Nicola Rivers' assessment that fourth wave feminism has been preoccupied with such notions as choice, empowerment, and agency. It is no coincidence that the productions I subsequently discussed share this preoccupation, and it is not surprising that in a number of ways the issues inherent in postfeminist engagement with *The Bacchae* reappeared. Rivers notes that it is important to unravel 'the slippage between understandings or presentations of postfeminism(s)' (4). The examples in this chapter offer an opportunity to begin doing so, at least in relation to *The Bacchae*. As I identified in the last chapter, this play, which features compellingly vociferous representations of women despite the fact that their controlling male authority figure holds all the power, seems to be consistently staged in the twenty-first century partly because those representations can be seen, through a postfeminist sensibility, as progressive. All the while men continue to occupy the positions of creative power that shape the representations in performance. Such productions may appear to

be women-centric in performance, but I would argue that they are a symptom of a more problematic postfeminism. A distinction needs to be made between these and theatrical receptions that seek to bring postfeminism into conversation with their work, either by acknowledging the way it impacts contemporary women or by creating complex, contradictory representations of women on stage. Crucially, these have been the productions that feature women in positions of creative power. I do not mean to make an essentialist assertion here – having women in positions of power does not guarantee progressive theatre-making – but the case studies explored in this chapter vividly demonstrate the difference that can be made.

Regardless of their (post)feminisms, both Lazarus and By Jove's productions demonstrate an important point. Dionysiac liberation, as represented and experienced in *The Bacchae*, is closely bound up with how women experience it. As such, drawing on the experience of the women involved in engaging with *The Bacchae* has an impact on how Dionysiac liberation is represented. This was also the case in the previous chapter (and, indeed, throughout this study). Here, however, it is apparent how the particular conditions of fringe theatre facilitate such theatrical receptions. Working in this context opens up possibilities for theatre-makers. With both By Jove and Lazarus, we were able to pursue collaborative, devising-based approaches without pressure to adhere to an original text. We were able to do this with a large ensemble of actors and other theatre-makers, Lazarus' group even larger than By Jove's, and thus the number of women involved with these productions was higher. With *Before*, we not only were able to make work for a very specific audience, but this material could be reworked over a long period of time, both by the individual members of the company and the group as a whole. This ultimately manifested as *Here She Comes*, the most woman-centric performance reception of

*The Bacchae* encountered in this study. Such approaches to making work are not impossible outside of the fringe, but the conditions of institutional theatre certainly make them rarer.

While these productions make the connection between women's experience and Dionysiac liberation explicit, they also reveal an emphasis on the individual as a way of achieving this. *Here She Comes*' unprecedented focus on women comes in the form of a one-woman show, where the characteristic collectivity of maenadism is collapsed into a single writer and performer offering a relatively narrow perspective. We avoided this with *Before* to some extent, but we laid the groundwork for *Here She Comes*, both in our interest in Agave and in our decision not to stage a chorus. Lazarus did include a chorus, but in reimagining each member through fragments of the performers' biographies, their capacity to operate and be understood as a group was mediated by an understanding of them as individuals. There is nothing inherently wrong about this: it certainly avoids homogenising a diverse group of women's identities or suggesting that a particular group represents all women. It is important to note, however, that this focus on individuality is representative of recent feminist thinking that is inextricably bound up with neoliberal ideologies, as Rivers suggests (24).

Fringe conditions may allow for effective disentangling of the conflicting ideologies bound up in postfeminism, but there are drawbacks and limits. Payment for artists is rare, and as the Lazarus' production demonstrates, when there are few other means of compensating artists for their labour, this can seem extremely exploitative. Lack of payment is just one of the many difficulties of working on the fringe: *Before* shows the impact that factors beyond the control of any individual can have. The scale and ambition of a project is often most affected, limiting the number of artists able to give their time to it, and indeed how much time any individual artist is able to devote. Beyond this, the extreme ephemerality of the fringe threatens

to curtail the reach and impact of any given project. It can also skew a project's legacy thanks to the partial online archive provided by blog-based reviews. A comparison between the reviews for *Here She Comes* and Lazarus' production, for example, would suggest that the latter was not only progressive in its politics but of an excellent quality – it consistently received four stars from reviewers. The significance of *Here She Comes*, with its structural, political, and aesthetic centring of women, is less visible in the reviews it received. While critics such as Amy Russell from the spoken word-oriented website *Sabotage Reviews* demonstrated in their reviews what Brady's show was trying to achieve, the dissatisfaction of those expecting a more conventional piece of theatre weighs heavily against this.<sup>123</sup> The result is a situation in which the nuances of what can be achieved with fringe work are swallowed up by a critical economy that favours work that emulates the mainstream. While fringe companies can counter this to some extent by providing documentation of their work online – including filmed performances and copies of the texts used – these fragmented traces of live-text cannot convey the full effect of a performance that made use of the conditions of fringe theatre.

The ephemerality of fringe work makes it all the more crucial to document this strand of the performance history of *The Bacchae* in the UK, staking the claim for productions such as those of By Jove and Lazarus as significant. This kind of work illuminates *The Bacchae* in new ways. In contrast to many of the productions discussed in this study, including those such as Kneehigh's that foreground women, Lazarus' and By Jove's maenads operate outside of an understanding of the Dionysiac centred on sexual pleasure. These fringe productions emphasise the Dionysiac as maenadic experience; as a result, the question of what motivates the maenads

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<sup>123</sup> See especially Omaweng and Irwin. Our experience of receiving these mixed reviews led to a company decision not to invite press to *Medea*, the final show in our season.

has significant ramifications. All three productions draw a connection between the oppressiveness of the society the maenads live in and their willingness to embrace Dionysiac liberation. Furthermore, in problematising the association between women, the feminine, and the irrational depicted in *The Bacchae*, these productions call into question the role Euripides' play has had in furthering misogynistic tropes. Perhaps most importantly, examining the processes that created these readings of *The Bacchae* demonstrates that any individual engagement with Euripides' play needs to be considered not only in relation to its text – or, indeed, its live-text – but in the light of how the live-text came to be.

Above I referenced the fact that there is a higher proportion of women working on the fringe than in any other theatre-making context in the UK, and that the structures of fringe groups more readily allow women to occupy positions of creative power. The case studies in this chapter demonstrate that this environment can lend itself to illuminating readings of *The Bacchae* that are predicated on maenads and their experience. The correlation between the women-oriented aspects of fringe theatre and outright focus on women's experience when engaging with *The Bacchae* is significant. Perhaps this is not so surprising; after all, in myth maenads are always on the fringes of society. It follows that work centred on the maenad would thrive outside of the mainstream. The hegemonic, androcentric structures of institutional theatre seem to prove hostile, so it may be that maenads continue to exist in the margins. But if *The Bacchae* indicates anything, it is that maenads retain the capacity to violently disrupt the workings of androcentric power. Incorporating women-centric and women-led fringe work into the performance history of the play may not be disruption equivalent to *sparagmos*, but it does challenge the androcentricity of performance histories as they stand, including the dominance

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of work from mainstream, institutional theatre-makers that have marginalised women in performance and in their creative teams.



## CONCLUSION      Towards Maenadic Poetics

In this study, I have explored performance receptions of *The Bacchae* that span more than a hundred years of British theatre-making. A shift can be traced across these receptions, from a focus on Dionysus to a focus on Agave and her fellow maenads. As theatre-makers working in different contexts, forms, and against the backdrop of changing feminisms have engaged with *The Bacchae*, maenadic experience has emerged as a way of exploring the intersection between female identity, liberation, and oppression in modern Britain. These receptions demonstrate that an androcentric reading centred on Dionysus is not as inevitable as the play's culture-text makes it seem. Instead, the maenad emerges as the figure around which women-led and women-centric performance receptions cohere.

By continuing to focus on the maenad, the performance receptions I have explored also challenge Dionysus' dominant place in scholarship on the play's theatrical afterlife. Erika Fischer-Lichte's *Dionysus Resurrected* and Simon Perris' *The Gentle, Jealous God* both privilege Dionysus in their titles, in their analyses, and in their conclusions: Fischer-Lichte sees Dionysus as the god of globalisation, while for Perris he is god of 'translation, adaptation, and other modes of textual transmission' (167). These theorisations form the basis for how they conceptualise and account for the journey of *The Bacchae* in the modern world. It is not the case with the receptions that I have explored: instead, they reassert the focus suggested by Euripides' own choice of title, putting the bacchae back into the play that bears their name. As such, these receptions act as a reminder that a performance history of *The Bacchae* is as much about the women who worship the god as it is about the god himself.

By exploring performance receptions through a focus on live-text, I have illuminated some instances in which *The Bacchae* has come to be performed on the modern stage. My approach rejects the notion that Euripides' play has inherent universal value; rather, it suggests that the play is *made* relevant through being worked on by theatre-makers. This approach also reframes text's significance in the performance receptions I have explored: while text does contribute to meaning, it is interpreted in the moment of live performance through a range of signifiers, many of which cohere around actors' bodies. The interpretation of these signifiers is nuanced by contextual factors. Thus, the play is made intelligible through the labour of theatre-makers and the interpretive faculties of audience members.

If the majority of performance receptions documented and discussed by current scholarship predicate the play's intelligibility on Dionysus, then the examples I have looked at in this study make *The Bacchae* intelligible through images and motifs that foreground women. These receptions emphasise that while the play has the potential to offer progressive representations of women, these representations are not intrinsic to Euripides' text: they must be shaped by theatre-makers who allow feminist potentiality to be realised in performance. In almost every reception encountered in this study, theatre-makers have made adaptive interventions in their engagement with *The Bacchae* and its text. This includes: filling in a lacuna in the extant Greek text by giving Agave new material, as in the case of Carson's translation for the Almeida; inserting new material that expands women's voices in what is otherwise a version of Euripides' text (this occurred in productions by Kneehigh, the Royal & Derngate, and Lazarus); and offering a completely new text that is more formally adaptation (as with *Rites*, *A Mouthful of Birds*, and By Jove's work).

In the past, scholars have formalised the interventionary strategies utilised by some of the performance receptions I have encountered. I discussed some examples in Chapter 2, including Katharine Worth's notion of 'earthing' and Helene Keyssar's 'dangerous history.' Both Worth and Keyssar observe that *Rites* and *A Mouthful of Birds* articulate a poetics that reconfigure the possibilities presented by Aristotle's model. This is related to Núria Casado-Gual's 'postmodern Dionysian dramaturgies,' which I discussed in Chapter 3 in relation to Kneehigh's production: a way of working that also resists Aristotelian poetics while focusing attention on marginalised vectors of identity such as age, race, and gender (75-77). Perhaps the most productive way for me to synthesise my findings in this study is to similarly formalise common qualities in the receptions I have examined: what I have termed maenadic poetics, a way of approaching *The Bacchae* by focusing on the maenad. As a means of moving towards an understanding of what these poetics might offer future scholarship, I will briefly return to my case studies to demonstrate how focusing on the maenad facilitates new ways of thinking about Euripides' play.

Emma Rice's programme note for her production in 2004 is a productive place to start. There Rice uses the analogy that women are not sticks of rock with the word 'good' running throughout – rather, they are complex beings. In Kneehigh's production and throughout many of the other performance receptions I have examined, the maenad becomes a way of staging complicated and conflicted female selfhood. The specifics of this complexity differ from woman to woman – many of the receptions resist homogenising women's experiences – but the two motifs that occur most frequently are pleasure and violence. Importantly, these are closely bound up with one another, and the narrative of *The Bacchae* offers a scenario that demonstrates how inextricable the connection is.

Euripides' text begins with Dionysus announcing that he has driven all of the women of Thebes up to Mount Cithaeron in a state of frenzy: these Thebans are therefore literal maenads in the sense of maddened women (l. 32-33). Both the first messenger's report and the initial choral odes nevertheless indicate that worshipping Dionysus is pleasurable.<sup>124</sup> Many of the performance receptions I have looked at pick up on the pleasurable possibilities of the Dionysiac and use it to grant maenads agency: in acknowledging that women who become maenads do so at least in part because of pleasure, these receptions also acknowledge that the women made a choice. Furthermore, these receptions imagine that the appeal of the Dionysiac is heightened by the frustration and oppression the Theban women usually experience in their daily lives. The murderous violence of the maenads is consequently framed as a belated manifestation of this frustration and oppression. In *Rites*, *A Mouthful of Birds*, *The Lightning Child* and the productions by Kneehigh, the Royal & Derngate, By Jove, and Lazarus, the oppression experienced by the maenads is overtly gendered, with Pentheus positioned as the symbolic figurehead of an oppressive patriarchal system. Thus, the maenads' murder of Pentheus becomes less about Dionysus' revenge against the Theban royal family and more of an act in which the violence of the oppressor is turned back against him by those he has oppressed.

In the culture-text of *The Bacchae*, the pleasure of the Dionysiac is often explicitly sexual in nature. *The Lightning Child* is an example of how this can play out in a way that reduces the agency of the women being represented (it is no surprise that Walker and Darvill were influenced by the milieu of the long 1970s). In comparison, Kneehigh find a place for sex in the Dionysiac that correlates with their positioning of Agave as escaping oppression: previously

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<sup>124</sup> The first messenger begins with a vivid description of the celebratory activities of the Theban maenads (l. 677-713). The parodos emphasises the thrill of participating in Dionysiac rites. The chorus' subsequent ode (l. 370-432) describes the joy that comes with worshipping Dionysus.

limited by socially inscribed identities, her discovery of sexual pleasure on Cithaeron becomes part of her liberation. Other receptions pursue an understanding of Dionysiac pleasure that circumvents the centring of sex. This is especially the case for the By Jove and Lazarus receptions (which is, I suspect, a consequence of my involvement). The pairing of each chorus member with a 'wild woman' from myth and literature in the Royal & Derngate's production enabled Lowe and Sansom to suggest that Dionysiac pleasure comes from a number of sources, including sex, companionship, artistic passion, faith, and rage. The latter echoes the suggestion in *A Mouthful of Birds* that violence, as much as it is rooted in oppression, may also be pleasurable: Lena thinks it is 'nice to make someone alive and it's nice to make someone dead' (Churchill and Lan 51), and when Dan dances precisely the dance his victims want, they die of pleasure.

These receptions emphasise the body as the site in which pleasure and violence become entangled. Indeed, the Dionysiac is imagined as offering the possibility to reclaim ownership of the body from a cultural system that has limited it through gendered codification. In both Kneehigh and By Jove's plays, Agave is able to rediscover the sensuality of her body. Snake-like, Kneehigh's Agave sheds the skins of daughter, mother, and queen, and as her 'new skin tingles,' she feels that she can 'do anything' (Grose and Murphy 112). In Haines' monologue 'I' for the 2015 version of *Before*, Agave's journey into the wilds of Cithaeron allows her to see her body in small but new ways: she notices that on one of her feet, her toe has a little curl (By Jove, *Before* 2015 6). Brady extrapolates on this in *Here She Comes*: when Agave finally moves her feet past the threshold of her domestic confines, she experiences a sensory explosion. With her 'limbs free to blaze / under / no man's gaze,' Agave is able to 'reclaim her life.' Perhaps the most extraordinary simultaneous reclamation of both body and life, given the period in which it

appeared, is in *A Mouthful of Birds*. Following his Dionysiac possession, Derek is able to embrace his identity as a woman, a release from 'the man who possessed [his] body' – in other words, his socially assigned gender (Churchill and Lan 52). Skin that used to wrap Derek up now 'lets the world in' (ibid.). Nevertheless, in each of these receptions, maenadic reclamation of the body also leads to violence. In fact, the final lines of *A Mouthful of Birds* suggest that the ambient violence of a capitalist patriarchal system is not always purged through the Dionysiac, instead becoming trapped in the body. It is significant that a woman, Doreen/Agave, expresses this sentiment, suggesting that in a capitalist patriarchal system, the traumatic legacy of violence disproportionately affects women.

Dance is a characteristic activity of the maenad in the ancient world. In *The Bacchae* dance occurs on stage in the choral odes and is implied to occur off-stage on Cithaeron; Dionysus ends his opening monologue by inciting the chorus to dance while informing the audience he is leaving the stage to dance with the Theban maenads (l. 55-63). In almost all of the performance receptions I have looked at dance is crucial, deployed as a form that corporeally expresses the maenadic intertwining of pleasure and violence. *A Mouthful of Birds* is emblematic in this regard: its disparate modern characters are united in a maenadic identity only when they come together in danced sequences that convey the pleasures of violence. This culminates in Pentheus/Derek's *sparagmos*, which takes the form of a dance 'in which moments of extreme happiness and of violence from earlier parts of the play are repeated' (Churchill and Lan 50). Dance also plays a key role across many of the other receptions I have looked at: in *Rites*, the death of the Pentheus-figure is immediately preceded by the women's frenzied song and dance rendition of 'Knees Up Mother Brown' (Duffy, *Rites* 24); Kneehigh's encounter between Agave and Pentheus in the woods is described as a 'dance of death' (Grose and Murphy 115); and Lowe

calls her chorus' earthquake-equivalent a 'dance of destruction' (31). The death of Pentheus in both By Jove's *Before* and Lazarus' production was staged as a choreographed movement sequence with elements of dance in it.

To borrow Caryl Churchill's phrase, dance allows these receptions to 'get away from words,' emphasising that maenadic experience explodes logocentrism. The closeness of pleasure to violence expressed by dance underscores its dangerousness to patriarchal structures: women's pleasure is simultaneously violence against men. This dangerous dancing is both an embodied act – the experience of women utilising their own bodies outside of patriarchal regulation – and an aesthetic act in the sense it is a form of art. (This recalls Prins' observation that the maenad's kinaesthetic experience of Dionysus resonated with the New Woman movement at the beginning of the twentieth century.) The repeated emphasis on dance and movement as a fundamental part of maenadic experience therefore underlines the vital corporeal and non-verbal dimensions in *The Bacchae* that these receptions capture despite not always strictly adhering to Euripides' text. Indeed, when the text has been staged without a sophisticated engagement with dance – as in 1908 and with the Almeida – problems have arisen, not least because the women playing the chorus have felt frustrated.

Another characteristic feature of the maenad is collectivity. This is crucial in the both *A Mouthful of Birds* and *Rites*, where the collective nature of maenadic sisterhood is placed under scrutiny. In *Rites*, this form of kinship is realised spatially: only women are admitted into the toilets that are Duffy's analogue for Cithaeron, and so maenads are defined according to strict notions of gender. The play turns on the realisation that gender is far from easily decoded through reading how the body is presented, and therefore that the boundaries of sisterhood ought to be expanded if the oppression that leads the women to seek their own space is to be

challenged. In *A Mouthful of Birds*, the moments of danced maenadic collectivity are juxtaposed with the narratives of individual characters, allowing for a multiplicity of experiences to be staged while also maintaining a sense of the collective. The Kneehigh and Royal & Derngate productions carry forward this impulse to explore maenads as individuals and as a collective, naming their maenads after archetypes that allowed them to have ‘spotlight’ moments without interrupting the chorus’ group status. Harrington-Odedra also opted for this spotlight approach in Lazarus’ production.

More recently there have been difficulties negotiating the tensions between individuality and collectivity. These tensions are demonstrated by the contrasting approaches to the maenad taken by the Almeida’s production and *Here She Comes*. The Almeida staged the chorus as an anonymised, if diverse, group, but for the women working on the production this proved to be ‘tribalizing’ in a reductive way because it represented women’s experiences as ‘general rather than specific’ (Edwards, interview). In contrast, *Here She Comes* was hyper-specific: it collapsed maenadic experience into a single voice and body, eliminating the chorus and foregrounding Agave in a way that is unparalleled amongst the receptions I have encountered. Both the Almeida’s production and *Here She Comes* emerged against the backdrop of fourth wave feminism, a strand of feminism that Nicola Rivers notes is entangled with neoliberalism’s privileging of the individual over the collective (24). This is important to bear in mind, because it raises questions for future performance receptions of *The Bacchae*: what does it mean to be a maenad in a socio-cultural environment not interested in collectivity?

There were other issues with the Almeida’s production, of course. These were partly the result of a process that separated the named characters (played by three men) and the chorus (played by ten women) until almost the end of rehearsals (Edwards, interview). The issues were



also a consequence of a power structure in which a male artistic director assented to a male director using the resources of a major theatre to stage *The Bacchae* in a way that handed over the only named female character to a man. This serves as a reminder that while a maenad-focused reading of performance receptions of *The Bacchae* can generate new insights into Euripides' play, it is also important to consider the processes that led to these receptions. Rice's approach is again instructive here: in aiming to 'reveal, not conceal' the story of *The Bacchae* to audiences (qtd. in Lilley 14), Rice set up a creative process that demonstrated the fundamental importance of women to the play. For what may have been the first time on the British stage, a production using Euripides' title allowed Agave to take precedence over Dionysus and Pentheus – the play became Agave's tragedy. This greatly contrasts James Macdonald's approach at the Almeida, in which a man played both Pentheus and Agave; next to a female presenting chorus, Carvel's Pentheus was framed as natural while his Agave became the kind of constructed travesty figure that Sue-Ellen Case argues Greek tragedy perpetuates. The theatre-making processes that facilitate a focus on the maenad – the creative decisions that are made and the people with the power to make them – must therefore be taken into account.

Considering the theatre-making process has proved particularly illuminating in regard to the relationship between the women engaging with *The Bacchae* and the on-stage representations of women they create. Perhaps one of the reasons Kneehigh found Agave and the maenads to be so significant is because the company's process allowed the women working on the production – not just Rice, but Anna Maria Murphy as a writer and Éva Magyar and Leonie Dodd as actors – to reflect on the ways the story resonated with them. Other performance receptions that prioritised the maenad – *A Mouthful of Birds*, *Before*, and Lazarus's production – adopted similar company-inclusive ways of working. The Lazarus example is

helpful because it also demonstrates that the empowerment provided by an inclusive devising process can be complicated if it is within the context of traditional theatre-making hierarchies that prioritise director and writer over other individuals involved, especially actors. Thus, a focus on the maenad – as either a theatre-maker engaging with *The Bacchae* or as a scholar investigating the play's performance history – needs to be mediated by a concomitant focus on the labour and agency of women involved in the creative process.

There are further synergies to be found between maenads on stage and the women theatre-makers responsible for these representations. Many of the theatre-makers whose work I have explored have used the maenad to challenge assumptions and stereotypes about women. The most pronounced examples are *Rites* and *A Mouthful of Birds*: Duffy wanted to contest the political efficacy of gender essentialism, while Churchill sought to counter the idea that women are inherently peaceful. By Jove's *Before* used Agave to interrogate the cultural bind for women in the postfeminist moment, where 'liberation is more complicated than it seems.' In these receptions, Dionysus is an ethically dubious catalyst for change, reflecting the ambivalence towards the god at the end of *The Bacchae*. My personal experience of thinking through Dionysiac liberation by working on *Before* ultimately influenced the monologue I wrote for Lazarus' production, in which the Cadmus-equivalent Katrine agreed that change was needed but called for better ways to achieve it. As such, the maenad – most especially Agave – becomes in these receptions a way for theatre-makers to render the oppressive conditions of a patriarchal culture visible while rethinking how these conditions can be alleviated.

*The Bacchae* may have afforded theatre-makers the opportunity to explore complicated representations of women that challenge assumptions around gender and highlight a diverse range of lived experiences, but it is crucial to acknowledge that this diversity has only gone so

far. Trans women, for example, have rarely been represented when considering the maenad; on the contrary, some of the receptions I have explored have created hostile environments for trans identities. Productions such as the Almeida's, where the audience repeatedly found the spectacle of Pentheus dressing as a woman – and of Carvel then playing a woman – a cause for laughter, demonstrate this in practice. Kay Gabriel's critique of Carson's translation as complicit in transphobia demonstrates another dimension to the issue: the play risks becoming a site to rehearse ongoing conflicts between pro- and anti-trans feminisms that have featured prominently in recent discourse and activism.<sup>125</sup> If the play has feminist potentiality, it is important not to make assumptions about what kinds of feminism it can be made to resonate with, and to ensure performance histories pay attention to receptions that do not make essentialist assumptions about women's identities and experiences.

Race is another area in which the diversity of the maenad has proved limited. Although *A Mouthful of Birds* did feature two women of colour – distinguishing it from the all-white cast of *Rites* – critics such as Elin Diamond have pointed out that the piece failed to fully account for race in its unpicking of socio-cultural oppression ('Closing No Gaps'). Other receptions that I have discussed in the context of their pro-women creative choices made more problematic decisions when it came to race. The case in point here is the Royal & Derngate production, which was set in a desert city modelled after examples such as Dubai (Lowe, interview), and cities in Qatar and Saudi Arabia (Lowe, *The Bacchae* 2). Although Lowe was conscious of not writing an 'ignorant Muslim bashing play' that made assumptions about Islamic women and

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<sup>125</sup> Two recent examples demonstrate that this issue afflicts superficially progressive contexts as much as it does elsewhere: the inadvertent inclusion of an anti-trans group at the head of the 2018 London Pride parade (see Necati), and an open letter by a group of academics at UK universities condemning trans-inclusive diversity training being provided to their institutions by LGBTQ+ charity Stonewall (see Duffy, 'After 30 academics...').

oppression, choosing such a setting as a means of making the all-female revolt of the Theban maenads conceivable to a UK audience nonetheless traded on these assumptions in an uncritical way (interview). The production's other preoccupations left no space to unpack the theatre's or audience's own position in relation to the chosen setting. Just as *A Mouthful of Birds*, in Raima Evan's analysis, 'fails to develop a theatrical vocabulary that subverts a racist ideology,' so too did the production in Northampton (280). This lack of critical attention on race is all the more troubling because successive performance receptions have made attempts to diversify the kinds of women's experiences indexed by on-stage maenads.

If there is a positive correlation between women taking key creative roles on a production and more thoughtful, sensitive attention being paid to the representation of women in performance receptions of *The Bacchae*, the lack of focus on race is perhaps explained by the absence of women of colour from production teams: as far as I have been able to ascertain, a woman of colour has yet to either direct or provide the text for a reception of Euripides' play on the British stage. As with my observation in Chapter 3 about women theatre-makers generally, I do not wish to make an essentialist assertion here. But a director or writer with, for example, an Asian heritage may have a different relationship to the fact that in *The Bacchae* the chorus come from Asia; they may respond to this vector of the chorus' identity with greater sensitivity as a result. Such an individual may be less likely to collapse the chorus into the off-stage maenads in a way that erases the Asian aspect of the chorus' identity, as was the case in productions such as Kneehigh's, Lazarus', and *The Lightning Child*. In any case, like the interplay of gender, the text of *The Bacchae* offers the potential to engage with race (and, indeed, the intersection between race and gender). But as with gender, this is fraught potential, and has led to deeply problematic

staging choices, such as Peter Hall's decision in 2002 to initially dress the chorus in burqa-like orange outfits that were then removed in the parodos.

Focusing on the maenad generates new readings of *The Bacchae*. Recuperating receptions that perform these readings enriches understanding of the overall performance history of the play. But a focus on the maenad evidently also raises new questions: if women are important to the play, how are women defined? What are the implications for thinking about women in a narrative that stages provocative and potentially regressive ideas about gender? What kinds of women have had their experiences staged as part of the maenadic, and who is doing the staging? Is the maenad best understood as a complex individual, as part of a collective, or both – and how can this be staged in a way that proves rewarding for the women involved? Is the maenad always a helpful, progressive model for thinking through issues around women's oppression and liberation? Drawing together the insights found in the various receptions of *The Bacchae* I have explored in this thesis provides an opportunity to conceptualise them as maenadic poetics, a genealogy of women-led and women-centric theatre-making. Moving forward with these poetics in mind, using them to seek out further receptions that similarly focus on the maenad, may help to answer some of the questions I have raised.

The search for performances that resonate with maenadic poetics of course needs to go beyond the UK. It may also need to go beyond *The Bacchae*. The Royal & Derngate production gestures in this direction. In situating *The Bacchae* amidst a season of 'wild women' – and in animating the chorus with personalities inspired by male-created archetypes of women – Laurie Sansom and Rosanna Lowe demonstrated that the maenad connects Euripides' play to a wide range of myth and literature, ancient and modern. Exploring these connections further may be a route forward, because the other archetypal women that resonate with the maenad may also

have been the subject of reclamations by feminist theatre-makers. In this way, the receptions I have examined here could be contextualised amidst a wider practice of revisioning images of subversive women originally produced by androcentric cultures. Might this be what maenadic poetics in fact formalises – not only the practice of theatre-makers who foreground the maenad and thereby reshape how *The Bacchae* is understood in performance, but a practice that brings Euripides' play into dialogue with related archetypal women? This would be akin to Keyssar's 'dangerous history,' using performance to make the past and present intelligible in ways that debunk misogynist stereotypes and illustrate a long record of women's oppression as well as women's resistance to that oppression.

The intertextual connections opened up by the maenad offer a wide range of possibilities for continuing to develop maenadic poetics beyond my findings in this study. The Royal & Derngate's framing of the maenad as a 'wild woman' brings the performance histories of canonical texts such as Ibsen's *Hedda Gabbler*, Lorca's *Blood Wedding*, and Miller's *The Crucible* into play, as well as the reception histories of other mythic women such as Ariadne, Philomela, and Procne.<sup>126</sup> Similarly, By Jove's *Season of Violent Women*, of which *Here She Comes* was a part, suggests connections between the maenad and figures such as Medea; taken alongside *The Crucible*, this further establishes parallels to the archetype of the witch. As a figure associated with the empowering potential of women's collective dancing, the maenad might also resonate with texts in which this kind of dancing serves a celebratory and non-tragic purpose – the hit musical *Mamma Mia!* and its film adaptations, for example – or in which dance is used to explore women's intersociality, as in Clare Barron's recent play *Dance Nation*.

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<sup>126</sup> Wertenbaker's *The Love of the Nightingale*, which adapts the myth of Philomela and Procne, was performed by a youth group as part of the Royal & Derngate's 'Festival of Chaos.'

The maenad may be framed as the wild woman, the violent woman, or the dancing woman, but literally she is the 'mad woman.' The polysemic possibilities afforded by that word, 'mad,' offer another way to look at the maenad, and thus maenadic poetics, signifying not insanity but rage.<sup>127</sup> This expresses the aspects of the performance receptions I have looked at that link the violence of the maenads to gendered socio-cultural oppression, articulating the murder of Pentheus by Agave and the other Theban women as a metaphor for women's furious refusal to tolerate the inequities of the patriarchal system any longer. In performance, this can function as a call to arms, as was the case in Morgan Lloyd Malcolm's *Emilia* (2018), which ended with the lead woman delivering a furious monologue that told the audience that 'if [men] try to burn you, may your fire be stronger than theirs so you can burn the whole fucking house down.' This was followed by '[a] song, a dance, a celebration' (75). The raging and dancing of the all-female cast is one way that Malcolm's play invokes the maenad.<sup>128</sup> Understanding *Emilia* as implicated in maenadic poetics situates the play as related to the genealogy of feminist theatre practice exemplified by performance receptions of *The Bacchae* such as *A Mouthful of Birds*, Kneehigh's production, and *Here She Comes*. At the same time, it connects these receptions to another example of women-led and women-centric theatre-making that reimagines images of women from the past to speak to the feminist present.

Malcolm prefaces her text by asserting that the play 'isn't a historical representation. It's a memory, a dream, a feeling of [Emilia]' (vii). This is an instructive description for maenadic

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<sup>127</sup> See definition 6(a) of 'mad' as an adjective in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: 'Of a person: beside oneself with anger; moved to uncontrollable rage; furious.'

<sup>128</sup> The connection is made more explicitly when one of Emilia's students recites a passage from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in which Procne joins with a group of maenads to rescue her sister (48). The shadow of the maenad in *The Bacchae* emerges later when Emilia and the group of women she teaches violently eject a marauding man from their female-only classroom (66). One immediate way to develop my conclusions here would be to conduct a more thorough reading of *Emilia* in relation to the maenad.

poetics: they are less about historically accurate – or, indeed, textually accurate – representation, but rather the recovery of memories, dreams, and feelings that cohere around the figure of the maenad in her many aspects. One passage from *Emilia* evokes this vividly:

Almost nothing is kept. Nothing is remembered. But in our muscles we feel it. Memories of intention. Memories of need and fury and pain. We hear the echoes bouncing down the passage of time and into our dreams. We read what was recorded and we see what is missing. We see what they did not want us to write down. (56)

This demonstrates why the performance receptions explored here – a legacy of women’s theatre-making from Lillah McCarthy to SJ Brady – are valuable to theatre history, and to classical reception studies: not because they revive *The Bacchae* but because they perform the memories of need and fury and pain contained in the body of the maenad.



## APPENDICES

**A. Table of scenes in *Before They Told You What You Are***

The table below lists the various pieces of writing and movement generated in the process of creating *Before They Told You What You Are*. Three versions of the script are represented: the working script that we began our devising process with, the prompt copy for the AMPRAW performance in 2014, and the prompt copy for the Play! festival performance in 2015. A grey block indicates that the sequence was not included in that version of the script.

Sequence title	Author(s)	Content	Working Script	Prompt Copy 2014	Prompt Copy 2015
Garden	Wendy Haines	A Theban man talks to his absent wife.		Added in devising process.	Replaced with 'I Believe in Dionysus'
Prologue	(Devised)	Dionysus arrives.	Idea noted but not yet devised.	Text devised by ensemble.	
Fun	(Devised)	The ensemble dance.		Added in devising process.	Cut
Night	Wendy Haines	Agave speaks to Pentheus.			
Divinity 1	(Devised)	Dionysus visits Semele's tomb.	Idea noted but not yet devised.	Text devised by ensemble.	Position swapped with 'Denial'
Denial	Wendy Haines	Pentheus attempts to destroy a Dionysiac idol.			Position swapped with 'Divinity 1'
Divinity 2	(Devised)	Dionysus remembers Semele.	Idea noted but not yet devised.	Text devised by ensemble.	Cut
Fun 2	(Devised)	The ensemble dance erratically.		Added in devising process.	Cut
Talk	Wendy Haines	Cadmus and Agave talk about Pentheus.			Added prior to rehearsals.
Power	Wendy Haines	Dionysus tempts Agave.	Drafted		
Blind	Wendy Haines	Agave discusses the	Drafted		

		offer with her sister.			
I Believe in Dionysus	Wendy Haines	Two men discuss the departure of women from the city.	Idea noted but not yet devised.	Text written in devising process.	Moved to the beginning of the piece.
Dance	Wendy Haines	Pentheus confronts Cadmus and Teiresias.			
I	Wendy Haines	Agave leaves the city.			Added prior to rehearsals.
Action	Wendy Haines	Pentheus argues with one of his advisors.		Added in devising process.	
Mother	Wendy Haines	A boy asks his father about their missing mother.		Added in devising process.	
Anxieties / Justifications	Wendy Haines	Pentheus attempts to justify his views.	Idea noted but not yet devised.	Text written in devising process.	Replaced with 'Pentheus'
Pentheus	Wendy Haines	Pentheus attempts to justify his views.			A revised version of 'Anxieties/Justifications'
Rebirth	Wendy Haines	Agave submits to Dionysus.			
In the Woods with Dionysus	Alexander Woodward	The maenads revel in their Dionysiac freedom.			
Miracles 1	(Devised)	The women produce miracles.	Idea noted but not yet devised.	Movement devised by the ensemble.	
Imprisonment	(Devised)	Pentheus imprisons Dionysus.	Idea noted but not yet devised.	Not pursued.	
Bacchanal	(Devised)	"An immense party"; Dionysus is released from prison.	Idea noted but not yet devised.	Not pursued.	
Possession	Wendy Haines	Agave confronts			

		Dionysus; he demands that she bring him Pentheus' head.			
Miracles 2	(Devised) Later text by Wendy Haines	The women think they continue to produce miracles. By the 2014 performance, a short messenger speech was added.	Idea noted but not yet devised.	Movement devised by the ensemble; text added.	
Hell	Wendy Haines	A short messenger speech.		Cut	
Control	Wendy Haines	Pentheus decides to send his army to get the women.		Cut	
Loyalty	Wendy Haines	Agave pleads for Dionysus to return to them.		Added in devising process.	
Mirror	Wendy Haines	Pentheus dresses as a woman with Dionysus' help.			Replaced with 'Pentheus 2'
Pentheus 2	(Devised)	Pentheus submits to Dionysus and dresses as a woman.			Movement sequence devised in rehearsals.
Sparagmos	(Devised)	Pentheus is torn apart by Agave and the maenads.	Idea noted but not yet devised.	Movement devised by the ensemble.	Movement redevised by the new ensemble.
Teeth	Wendy Haines	Agave contemplates her son's head.		Cut	
To Kill My Son, the Lion	Alexander Woodward	Two parallel accounts of Pentheus' death from Agave.			

End	Wendy Haines	Agave confronts Dionysus.			
Divinity 3	Alexander Woodward	Dionysus announces his divinity.	Idea noted but not yet devised.		
Follower	Wendy Haines	Cadmus confronts Agave.			
Miracles 3	(Devised)	Agave attempts to reproduce miracles.	Idea noted but not yet devised.	Movement devised by the ensemble.	
Promises	(Devised)	The characters recount the promises Dionysus made them.	Idea noted but not yet devised.	Not pursued.	

## **B. Text of *Before They Told You What You Are* (Play! Festival Edit)**

*WH indicates text written by Wendy Haines; AW indicates text written by Alexander Woodward. Sequences without initials were devised by the company. I have preserved the entire text exactly as it was used in 2015, including fonts and errors/textual inconsistencies.*

*Four actors and a musician.*

*In the centre of the stage is a sandbox full of dirt.*

### **I Believe In Dionysus (WH)**

- Man:** I didn't hear any screaming.
- Another:** Not everyone was screaming.
- Man:** I didn't hear any though.
- Another:** It was outside.
- Man:** I was outside.
- Another:** Screaming, and dancing. I think.
- Man:** Did you see it?
- Another:** No. But I heard it.
- Man:** I could smell it. I could smell wine. Kind of a sour...
- Another:** Screaming, I believe I believe. There was an echo in the hills.

### **Prologue (AW)**

**Dionysus:**

Theban soil. Good, dark, Theban soil which nurtured my mother, Semele.

I'm finally here. I have returned to this soil which was soaked with her lightning-broiled blood. I wander amongst valleys which echoed with her sisters' mocking laughter. I behold the city ruled by her nephew who thinks his power can blot out memory of my birth. I have come home. (*Mocking, with nasty irony*) What is home to a god? What value can a mortal mother have when her blood is overwhelmed by the undying ichor in my veins? Do you really think there are such great rages in divine souls?

I have torn the feminine foundations out of this city. I've been whispering my vine-clad song in mortal minds, filling them with drunken prophecies of a new order. They will shout my praises with bleeding throats if I demand it. I have driven the women out of Thebes to sing my praises on the mountainside. Let them luxuriate in their languid, longed-for liberty. In time they will burn the pillars of their society. I do hope the flames will be pretty.

*The performers dance erratically*

**Night (WH)**

**Agave:** You're not asleep.

**Pentheus:** No.

**Agave:** Why not?

**Pentheus:** I'm thinking.

*Beat.*

I need some water.

**Agave:** I don't fetch things for you.

**Pentheus:** I didn't ask, what do you want?

**Agave:** Nothing.

*Beat.*

It's important you get your sleep.

**Pentheus:** I know.

**Agave:** You can't make these kind of decisions when you're tired.

**Pentheus:** How do you know if I'm- no, sorry. Goodnight.

**Agave:** I'll be there tomorrow.

**Pentheus:** No you won't.

**Agave:** I can go if I want to.

**Pentheus:** Don't delude yourself.

**Agave:** I want to be involved.

**Pentheus:** Not your place to be involved, please, I'm tired.

**Agave:** Thought you couldn't sleep?

**Pentheus:** Thought you didn't want anything.

**Divinity 1 (WH)**

*Dionysus watches Agave.*

**Dionysus:** Are you weak? Or scared? You feel like you deserve something? Your fingers are clenching, pinching, tension at nothing. You're pulling back the anger and I wonder if there's anything else left in you. What I could bring out. Breathe slowly. Your son denies you, denies me. We have that together.

**Denial (WH)**

*Pentheus holds an idol. He tries to crush it in his hand.*

**Agave:** It's made of steel.

**Pentheus:** It's not.

**Agave:** Solid.

**Pentheus:** You just think it is.

**Agave:** You'll brake your fingers doing that.

**Divinity 2 (WH)**

*Dionysus holds his crushed idol.*

**Dionysus:** They told me I was his son.

A god knows if he's being lied to.

Humans are weak, and I don't feel weak. I can make them see what they want, and they'll follow anyone who'll give them that. That's weak.

You dare lie to me? I am lies.

**Talk (WH)**

**Kadmos:** My grandson he's... He's uh... He's... Determined. He has integrity.

**Agave:** You could say that.

**Kadmos:** He's uh... We disagree on a lot of things but at the end- well he's where he's supposed to be.

**Agave:** He talks to you a lot.

**Kadmos:** He what?

**Agave:** You talk to him a lot.

**Kadmos:** Yes.

**Agave:** That's nice.

**Kadmos:** He never listens.

**Agave:** Why would you say that?  
**Kadmos:** Oh he... We disagree on a lot of things.  
**Agave:** But he's where he's supposed to be.  
**Kadmos:** Yes.

*Pause.*

**Agave:** There's a lot he doesn't know about you.

### **Power (WH)**

*Dionysus stands behind Agave.*

**Agave:** And if the person born with power is the wrong person?  
**Dionysus:** Then you change them.

*Dionysus covers her eyes.*

**Agave:** I don't see anything.  
**Dionysus:** You see blood.  
**Agave:** Whose is it?

### **Blind (WH)**

**Agave:** Do you trust me?  
**Aunt:** I... I have before.  
**Agave:** So?  
**Aunt:** I know you.  
**Agave:** Look at me.  
**Aunt:** No that's how it starts.  
**Agave:** Look at me.  
**Aunt:** No.  
**Agave:** Stop-  
**Aunt:** This is how it starts the- the crazy.  
**Agave:** Crazy?  
**Aunt:** Not that kind, I mean you'll tell me something and then we're off and  
fucking chaos.  
**Agave:** It's not me this time, it's someone else.  
**Aunt:** Who?  
**Agave:** Don't play stupid.



**Aunt:** I... I don't know.

**Agave:** Look at me.

**Aunt:** Why?

**Agave:** Listen to the bit of you that's saying look at me.

**Aunt:** There's something in your eye.

**Agave:** I know something you don't.

**Dance (WH)**

*Pentheus' grandfather Kadmos, and his friend Teiresias. They wear dressing gowns, drinking red wine, dancing and singing.*

**Pentheus:** You're an embarrassment.

*They laugh.*

You're not even dressed. People will see you.

*They push a bottle of wine into his hand.*

What am I supposed to do with this?

**Kadmos:** Give in to your appreciation of the world.

**Pentheus:** You're babbling. Babbling rubbish at me.

**Kadmos:** No, you cannot hear, there's a whole... world of what you're missing, you, you-

**Pentheus:** Stand still, please.

**Kadmos:** I will not.

**Pentheus:** I never expected this of you.

*Beat.*

No you're right, I haven't seen them, but why would they go if it wasn't to just... to go against everything we know is good for them. Convinced they know how to rule themselves, when it's not their job. She kept coming to my meetings, trying to be my advisor.

**Kadmos:** You can't force people to respect you.

**Pentheus:** Are you drunk? Drunk again, you are. Why don't you run after them, join their fucking cult.

**Kadmos:** It's no cult-

**Pentheus:** What is it then?

**Kadmos:** An abandonment.

**Pentheus:** Do you have nothing new to say?

**Kadmos:** I don't need to-

**Pentheus:** I wanted to help them.

**Kadmos:** I don't think they wanted your help.

**Pentheus:** Morally bankrupt.

### **I (WH)**

#### **Agave:**

Once you leave the city, the air is lighter, not forced into so many bodies. I look upwards when I walk, and that's not something I do. There's too many eyes in the city, and here there's just mine, watching the hills get closer to me, and the sides look less steep, spreading out, and the woods.

So the trees get thicker, but I can still see because my eyes adjust, we're so scared of the dark but we can live in it really, we can. The trees get thicker and I cross over a stream, I slip on the moss, there's moss on the rocks in the stream and I lose my shoe. The skin under my feet is too soft, it hurts walking on the ground but if we walked without shoes all the time, our skin would grow hard. Hard and you could- I realize this, as I climb out the other side of the stream. I take off the other shoe.

I knew, following the cracks in the bark like a map, feeling my way. Smelling the dirt on my wet feet. My little toe has a curl, a little curl. Only on one foot.

And he's there, staring. His eyes goring me, and there's a flinch of fear, the kind I like.

It's new, it's fear I can do something about, it's mine. The muscles of his hunched shoulders twitch, and I'm smiling. The hooves pummel the ground, daring me, saying dare. Dare. So I do, my feet go forward, bleeding on the stones, seeing red, breath steaming from the nostrils. The horns are thicker than my neck and I see them pearce, rip, and I'm giving too much, but there's a gentleness in the eyes, a promise of everything I need crying out of them, reaching a hand forward, not like you're imagining no, it's how I imagine, touching the face, feeling the strength that could kill me, and knowing that no, no no, it cannot hurt me. Because I won't let it.

**Action (WH)**

- Andrew:** The King of Inaction, that'll be your history. The King who stood by and did fuck all, while-
- Pentheus:** Say of me what you will, but I'm trying to get you to think rationally.
- Andrew:** This is not the time for rational, or talking, or anything, our women have left. Their children, their husbands, where are they? They're looking down and laughing at us. The King who sat on his arse and his many advisors.
- Pentheus:** I'm not denying their behaviour is abominable-
- Andrew:** Kadmos told me you, you know, you... when you found out they'd gone, that you were raving at him, what happened to that? That'd be useful.
- Pentheus:** He is my grandfather, and not on our side.
- Andrew:** The King who-
- Pentheus:** We have been betrayed, and there will be action.
- Andrew:** Bullshit, I'm leaving now, and I'm getting them back.
- Pentheus:** Are you an idiot?
- Andrew:** Are you scared of a bunch of women who are sat, starving on a mountain?
- Pentheus:** They are dangerous, you can't just run up there and... there's something else at work here.
- Andrew:** I thought you didn't believe-
- Pentheus:** Never, but there is trickery, and they have been fooled.
- Andrew:** You sit around speculating, someone should be bringing them back.
- Pentheus:** I have reports of extreme violence.
- Andrew:** I don't believe that.
- Pentheus:** Until we know what's really going on, we should tread carefully.
- Andrew:** Isn't your mother with them?
- Beat.*
- Pentheus:** Obviously.
- Andrew:** Doesn't that bother you?
- Pentheus:** Of course it does.

**Andrew:** But you won't go and get her?

**Pentheus:** It's not that simple.

**Andrew:** Women do change when they get older, don't they? I remember her-

**Pentheus:** I don't see what it is they're getting up there that they can't get down here. We can offer them...

**Andrew:** So?

**Pentheus:** They have let their emotions take them over, and we cannot do the same. They're deluded, they think they can keep themselves safe, and healthy, and we have to approach with care.

### **Pentheus (AW)**

I am king of this city. My will is the foundation stone of our laws. I alone stand between my people and chaos. This revolutionary revel is a threat to everyone in Thebes. If these ... *women* feel able to ignore my authority, what next? What will be the next target of this hysteria?

This catastrophe cannot come to pass. I will stop it. My men still know their place, the army acknowledges its duties. The bellowed bass of battle-cries should shock the wanton wastrels from their warrens. If not, a mailed fist surely has the strength to drag things back to the natural order.

Peace, obedience, discipline; is that really so much to ask?

### **Rebirth (WH)**

*Agave lies on the floor, dazed. Aunt watches.*

**Dionysus:** Forget yourself.

**Agave:** How do I do that?

**Dionysus:** Don't think.

*Beat.*

**Agave:** My bones are on fire.

**Dionysus:** Don't say anything.

*Beat.*

*Agave shuts her eyes. Dionysus leans over her.*

*Agave's body is limp. Dionysus lifts her arm, her leg, her head, making sure they are weightless. He takes his time. He moves her.*

**Aunt:** What's wrong with her?

**Dionysus:** Nothing.

**Aunt:** Agave?

**Dionysus:** She can't hear you.

*Pause.*

You can be next.

**In the Woods with Dionysus (AW)**

*The women celebrate.*

A quiet space between the trees.  
The ease of simply being us  
When we don't have to trust  
That those Others who are unlike you me  
Will continue to be as friendly  
As those civilised smiles seem to seem  
Without a witness to guard us with their glance.  
The business of knowing how well  
Things are going can be hell  
When showing of the swell of a breast,  
Or failing a test on how our gender or sex  
Should act might engender an attack  
Of cutting derision or of callous fists.  
So we've made the decision to go apart  
To the quiet bliss of a separate space  
Where we can talk or unselfconsciously dance  
At our own pace. In our own way.  
We invoke the name of our new deity  
Who is reviled because they seem so foreign.  
But it shouldn't be abhorrent  
To keep our liberated gaiety free from those  
Who suppose we should be pleased  
At how easy it would be to conform to their world,  
And perform in a way they say is more normal.  
Hurl away the box in which you're kept,  
Refuse to accept their labels.  
You are able to reclaim who you were before

They told you what you are.  
Roar your true self at the stars here beside us  
As we stand in the woods, free, with Dionysus!

### **Miracles 1**

*The women dig in the dirt and produce miracles. Dionysus pours the milk and wine.*

### **Rave (WH)**

**Agave:** It... it...  
**Dionysus:** I know.  
**Agave:** There was...  
**Dionysus:** I know.  
**Agave:** It was as if... as if.  
**Dionysus:** Exactly.  
**Agave:** Like a... a...  
**Dionysus:** Of course.  
**Agave:** And I... because there-  
**Dionysus:** That's right.  
**Agave:** And now... now...  
**Dionysus:** Yes.  
**Agave:** Now I want it.  
**Dionysus:** Bring me the head.

### **Miracles 2 (WH)**

*A messenger tells Pentheus about the women on the mountain. Meanwhile, the women perform their miracles.*

**Messenger:** They were like... you see in those, deer things like, the ones big cats eat. When something's following them, stalking, their head goes up really fast, and they look around. Always aware, like they think they need to be on guard. Yeah, they were doing that. I think they knew I was watching, or maybe not because I feel like they'd tear me up. Not because I was watching them, because I was not them. They don't want

a man's eyes on them, I don't know how that... I saw them tearing up animals, could of been to eat or it could have been, I don't know. But they clawed up the ground, digging, and I swear, they pulled something out. I could smell wine, it was coming out of the dirt. I wasn't that close but I could smell it, see it, but I can't have done. I can't have done. They drank. Made milk.

They just want to be left alone.

**Pentheus:** I have to reach them.

### **Loyalty (WH)**

**Agave:** Come back to us. Where are you?

**Aunt:** Don't plead. We don't need-

**Agave:** He is what we are now.

**Aunt:** He is our saviour. We can't make demands.

**Agave:** I demand him back, to teach us.

**Aunt:** He has others to teach.

**Agave:** He promised me. He promised me.

**Aunt:** You sound deranged, sleep.

**Agave:** No.

*Pentheus appears, disguised as a woman.*

### **Sparagmos**

*Pentheus is torn apart by Agave and the maenads.*

### **To Kill My Son, The Lion (AW)**

*Agave is questioned. She answers in two voices.*

I don't really remember.

Move me, you vine-clad liberator

It all happened so fast, really

Move through me and free me from myself

I wasn't myself. How do you expect me to remember?

Your free-flowing gift enflames my soul

David Bullen

Oh, fine, then ... I remember feeling warm

Your pulse and mine quicken together

As if I'd been running

Faster, harder, now whisk me away

Or dancing for hours

Outside myself I see me blaze

It felt good not to have to be ladylike for once

This life within me too much to bear

I felt so ... angry ... or happy ... energetic, certainly

Set me loose – freer! – I feel the world

Like I could do anything, like I had to do something

Bright sunlight charges to embrace me

The sun came from behind a cloud

Typhoon breezes kiss my burning skin

And I saw something moving in the trees

Feel the tingle of the Spring-blushed air

Trying to hide in the branches

I feel I've never breathed before

I tried to ignore it, to get back into the moment

More life! The stars burn inside my flesh

But I could feel its beady eyes watching me

A lion, young and sleek with tawny pride

It was my fucking brat

Surprise at the stranger's intrusion

Sticking his nose in my business once again

A moment stretched, luxuriant pause

He never lets me have a second to myself

Our stillness, such exquisite torment

He just can't stand the thought of me having my own life

It sticks, like crimson, sweat-scented silk



So I picked up a rock

It tears, oh how it tears, blood ribbons

And bashed him in the head

Fill my hungry lungs, O ecstasy

You should have seen his stupid face

O agony, sweet upon my ears

Crying, as if that had ever stopped me

My teeth, my fangs, chew my still-warm prize

So I hit him again

Blood-slick bone snaps. Enemy vanquished.

Maybe four more times

Tear head from weeping neck. My Trophy!

Until I was sure I'd killed the little shit

Me! With my god's power! I did this!

And I'd do it again.

There. Happy? Now, is there anything else you simply have to know?

### **End (WH)**

**Agave:** I did everything you asked.

**Dionysus:** I promised nothing, I owe you nothing.

**Agave:** You said I could feel this way forever.

**Dionysus:** You believed it was me who gave you your strength, it was never mine to give.

**Agave:** He was my son.

**Dionysus:** You wanted him dead.

**Agave:** No

**Dionysus:** Now you have what you want. His head is mounted above the city gate.

**Agave:** He was wrong for this city.

**Dionysus:** He should never have denied me.

**Agave:** And you are wrong for it as well.

### **Divinity 3 (AW)**

*Dionysus appears as a god.*

**Dionysus:**

I am a god, awesome and mighty, but you knew that already, didn't you? Deep down. These mortals whose lives were toppled as I stood up to my full height, you think they're from another age, so very far away from you. I see things differently. You're as much in my grasp as they were. And I am a god. I am a god, and I know that because I look around me and so there's no one else left. My brothers and sisters and father are dead. But me...you'll keep coming to me because you've nothing better. I'm the best kind of liberation you have. I'm the only way out of this rot you've allowed to fester in your world. My power is still strong. That's why you still raise my liquid gift and ask for blessings. Every week you all ask I grant you freedom from care. I will. I will let you join my dance. I will free you from yourselves. I will shake down the walls you put about yourselves. I will take away your fears and let you move. I will dissolve the chains that hold you back, but you still decide the direction. "It was the wine talking." No it wasn't. You said what YOU felt. "I wasn't myself." Yes. You were. Own it. Take responsibility. I know what you are, I see what you might be without restriction. You're as free to speak of love at a symposium as you are to rip a lion's fucking head off. I only open the door and wish you the best of luck. And because you don't know any better, I'll keep on opening that door again and again – and we'll tell this story once more. So, cheers. Health, wealth and happiness. Io Dionysus!

**Follower (WH)**

*Agave and Kadmos share silence.*

**Agave:** Did you want something?  
**Kadmos:** Not really.  
**Agave:** Ok. Thank you.  
**Kadmos:** For what?  
**Agave:** Nothing, I thought you were leaving.  
**Kadmos:** I put some flowers on the grave today.  
**Agave:** For that then.

*Pause. Kadmos stares at Agave. She is uncomfortable. More silence.*

Do you want something?  
**Kadmos:** How are you adjusting?  
**Agave:** Fine thank- fine. Just fine.  
**Kadmos:** Difficult shoes to fill.  
**Agave:** I'm managing.  
**Kadmos:** What's the matter?  
**Agave:** Stop it, stop what you're doing.  
**Kadmos:** Am I bothering you?  
**Agave:** You are.  
**Kadmos:** So sorry.  
**Agave:** There's nothing... nothing I can-  
**Kadmos:** Don't bother.  
**Agave:** It wasn't all my fault.  
**Kadmos:** Definitely don't bother.  
**Agave:** I want to-  
**Kadmos:** Is there any point in this? Is there any, any point in this?  
*Agave holds the idol.*  
**Agave:** You were dancing.  
**Kadmos:** I never... never.  
**Agave:** False.  
**Kadmos:** He was very real.  
**Agave:** A lie to me.

### **Miracles 3**

*Agave scratches at the earth, desperate to re-create the miracles. Nothing happens.  
Dionysus watches.*



**C. Text of *Here She Comes* (2019 re-formatting)**

*SJ Brady formatted this version of the text specially for inclusion here. I have preserved her text exactly as she gave it to me.*

# HERE SHE COMES

**An epic poem** (*based on  
The Bacchae*)

**SJ Brady** Produced by  
BY JOVE THEATRE 2017

WRITTEN AND PERFORMED BY SJ.  
BRADY 2017

Original music by Vivienne Youel.

**BEACH.**

Dogs like her.

In her darker moments she thinks they can smell the blood on her hands.  
No matter how hard she scrubs at her skin,  
how red raw her fingers sting- still they come.  
Sniffing, breathing, instincts drawn to a primitive being.  
So, in seeping knuckles in a panic at the sink,  
red floods her eyes- then she remembers, the blood is only her own.  
Her son's in disguise.

She's on a beach. Contemplating her mortality.

She's exiled- they don't like violent women. They don't understand  
how such soft hands could  
tear their own flesh, break their own bones. Unable to connect  
or comprehend, how her thoughts could *ever* extend to- she must be ill.  
The pressures too high for her mother's milk.  
But they're lucky if they had easy children to feed in their homes.

They don't tell you what to do if the ones you love, no longer love you. If your children don't like  
you. There's no leaflet or book 'Be the fire! Take its toll, be the strength they need to fuel your  
home- Be the backbone'.

She thinks: They sleep, they eat, they feed, until they grow strong. Stronger than me.

She's in recovery and thinks, I'll go and stay by the sea. Get some fresh air in me and  
try not to drink so much anymore.  
Always now careful of how many closely measured glasses are poured-  
one too many, one gin too merry-  
and she's flushed with imagery. Her body moaning,  
wrapped up in the heat, and *he's all she can see*.

She lies in the sand, trying to look discreet.  
Trying to blend in, hoping *not* to be seen.

Sand in her toes, and a dog at her feet. Welcome back to society-

let the integration begin.

The waters different now. The ground is dry and the waves softly lull in a  
slow but steady breathe out and pull.  
Moved by the rhythm of the tide, one enormous swell,  
one lethargic breath at a time.  
Lapping at the bay, shielded from the wind, a taste from the salt spray. Agave lies still.  
Allowing her lungs to fill, and lead in sync with the deep-sea breathing in time with the waves.

She watches children being cared for on the beach.  
There's something about their discovery of sand.  
Shouting out loud beneath small hats that shield, protect them from the sun.  
Burying secret things  
when nobody is watching.  
Sucking the salt from their hair, stones in hand, open voices on the air, eating sand.  
Surrounded by a rather large range of multi- coloured deckchairs.  
She allows the noise to surround her. Surround her inflamed skin and  
swollen face. Swollen cheeks from too much gin.

She lives on like this, it could be worse. Until one day at the sink, one final flashback too many

she snaps.

Three measures too much too merry, hands clutching-  
clasping at empty glasses,  
In a drunken state thinking, fuck this. I can beat it- I'm going back.  
I decide who I am.

Drunkenly she packs a bag. Grabs a coat  
- no-one to leave a note to - she empties the flat  
of all the rubbish, cans & fags and before she knows it  
the winds of the sand bank whistle in her ear,  
and she's outside,  
in the rain, blurry eyed.

But after an hour at a bus stop in the beckoning night, her breathing slows. Her mind races on,  
but the cold creeps slowly back into her bones.

She waits for a sign.

The wind is high, and she can hear  
angry waves crashing on the shore in the night, lamenting her pain. Thrashing at the ground  
that keeps her restrained. Roaring blindly  
she's estranged to her old ways,  
to her home. Tears sting her eyes and  
memory pulls at her throat.

*Stories run wild of how we came to be so hard skinned,  
and who invokes our memories.*

She waits for a sign.

There's no one around except for an old drunk man stumbling to a doorstep, it's the middle of  
the night.

*Where are you? Are you listening to me?* She speaks to the sky.

*What do you want from me?!*

Roaring blind, Agave screams into the night.

*I get no relief from what you did to me. I get no relief in how it's meant to be, in  
the depth of the night I tread the blue with only darkness beneath me.*

The old man shrugs his shoulders and goes inside.

She *waits* for a sign.

But Gods have nothing to gain when there's nothing new to say-

it's a waste of their time.

## **BIRTH, DIRT & BONE**

### **BIRTH**

In a long growing dawn,  
in the peaceful eye of a raging storm, I was laid.  
Left alone

David Bullen

I was born,  
content in a bed made  
lest a parent forget, and I grew strong.

I slept  
I was fed  
I slept, and I grew  
strong.

A *god*- that has grown in the wind and is born in a storm-  
late in the night he pushes a thorn  
into my side.  
Late in the night, into my side  
late in the night my tissue is torn.  
My skin growing thin  
he tries to steal my name- to push further in and increase the pain-  
but I say *no*.

So, he waits till I am full grown.  
He waits until I am alone.

*He* thinks: A city made for me. A city of earth,  
built over leaves, this city of dirt,  
the place of *my* birth my city of Thebes, lies at my feet.  
It sleeps  
it feeds  
It sleeps- until I return.  
A petrol can in my hand, my feet  
as fire in the streets- but nothing stirs.  
Still, the city sleeps.

Raging away every other day,  
roaring blind.  
He slits my hands building walls,  
he calls my name  
his anger won't subside. But my hands  
they feed the floors that align  
these rooms they breathe  
they let my soul be. I mark my lines  
my bloods in its veins- I say to him *you can't drive me away!* I say  
*these walls were made, and*  
*these walls will remain*  
*for my ghost to roam. This is my home.*

So, he waits until she is fully grown. He waits  
Until she is alone.

Amid this *Birth* and *Dirt* and soon to be *Bone*-  
he's, denied.

They should be falling at his feet!  
Dancing in the roads of these sun-drenched streets of - when it *suits* him- his city.  
He *needs* to be recognised, in this city of Thebes.

She was a main contender- in this denial of his godly pride. Her nephew-  
vine clad spawn of Zeus- pawing at the earth on which his mother died.

So, to suit his needs, he calls her name while she sleeps.  
How dare she deny me, this King mother of Thebes.  
She laughed him off, not a real god. No seed of Zeus? I'll



raze this city and I'll bring her to her knees.

## **IDOL.**

In the night, she turns on the radio so she can't hear him.

She closes her eyes, and thinks  
of all the other people who listen to the radio.  
Who let the music in.

She turns up the volume, but she  
can still hear her name.

She thinks you again?! With your overheated  
burning body laid heavy against  
the curve of my spine, you swine.  
*I know your type, well I'm not listening to you. It's not right.*

He tells her he *understands*. How such  
soft hands can be taken for granted,  
how she doesn't see  
how free she is, or could be- why do you deny me?  
Her ability to create her own path,  
to secure her own destiny- It's right there,  
beneath.

He whispers in her ear, sends her visions  
of fearless revisions of her life:  
a forest freedom; destroyed domesticity-  
a bottle and a half in and she's a fuckin' visionary.

## **It's NIGHT.**

Pentheus hears a clink, and thinks ah shit. She's on one.

You're drunk.

*Did I ever tell you that you have more of me in you than you would care to admit?  
Not enough of your fathers standing,  
his grand gestures made in landing him death.*

*'Man Of Sorrows'. That's what your name means.*

*Like father like son you're marked for tragedy and if we continue to deny him-*

Go to bed- says her son. Go to bed, you're drunk.

Feeding these feuds,  
a vengeful god taints the air, sowing his seeds ...  
If only she held her own- then she could be free.

## **HOME.**

She's not sure when the change was.  
When she first became a hindrance in her own home.  
Doors closing early, abrupt words, cut off mid-sentence, no longer heard-  
though her thoughts were  
no less- teenage years behaving absurd. It'll pass.

He's at *that* age. Of scornful gazes, and prying eyes, uncomfortable silences, irritation in company and heavy sighs at questions, slamming doors- irritation no less.

Daring to even enter the same room as him- no less- not really understanding why, she feels *stupid*. She feels the heat in her bones flare up in an instant- at locked doors, shut down screens and secrets held close in meetings- that she's not there for, so she cannot oppose- don't even *think* about it, hallway greetings. Darkening rooms and significant meetings.

Living alongside a longing to escape a spreading disease.

It seeped into all the corners of the house, like a rising damp, a shadow pronounced it sits in silence. In rotting wood, in growing ivy, it seeps around rooms growing violent.

Over time rotting stone and carpets frayed and dyed from heavy pacing and over spilled wine. The disease is at work. It grows

until only shadows shine through blinds, and she's kept to *one* room, for long periods of time.

Agave has obeyed the expectation of her life. She married wisely, she bore her children and her life developed through a maternal infusion. She has lived as society dictates she must

even when sisters mate with gods and keep their name in disgrace- She thinks, what for? Widowed. Alone with one child left. To be left in a rotting room

where no-one would even notice if she was gone. If she had been gone for days- she's placed further and further away, *just* out of reach.

In a sort of restrictive dress, with books to read, to keep her occupied, with tea.

With, *no need to come and talk to me*.

Out of reach, untouchable. Why should she need company?

You don't *need* to talk, to me.

Her son, in another room, on his knees in early midnight defeat, he shuts her out to carry alone and remains silent, until she leaves.

So, she waits.

But the disease pulsates from his room at the end of the hallway. Spreading its limbs, stretching, making its arc throughout this dying house. He's stopped listening.

A continuous ticking, the darkness thickening and the sound is too loud for her ears ... A pain's in her thigh and a god is alive-

*I'll try one more time.*

It's not that she doesn't love him- It's just that once Pentheus became King, it really did bring about a change, unfortunately- the worst, in him. *But*

*-there are times when I want him to be graceful in his manners, and a force to be seen. There are times when I urge him to rule with a hand that gives the people what they need. That conquering alone isn't enough to claim his territory- holding it requires the ability to govern, holding it requires the resources to love them. Of course*

*Stories run wild about the qualities of kin,  
the strength of the beast, the force of the god, the wildness within him ... but nothing can ever  
measure up to the construction of a King- so how can he win?*

*I go to my son. I go to the lion howling alone on his knees in early morning defeat- He shuts me  
out. I look to a daughter, but turned to ash she lies deaf to me, lost in a fire of her own and I'm  
left in a calling hallway.*

*Yearning, a stirring storm through a doorway, calls to me. Agave breathes.*

The disease doesn't stop at an outward reach, it's struck within.  
It riots through the walls soon to wear thin,  
the walls of this house, soon to crumble in sin.

She moves her feet. And  
here she comes,  
to that second last step on the stair  
that creaks. A final moment in the doorway  
before she leaves.

Deaf, between two worlds.

Her footsteps sink in time with the  
deep sleep breathing,  
breeding monotonous political dreaming of leaving her loved ones behind.

A deep breath is taken before she takes flight,  
a breath so deep it *stings* in the night-  
eyes wide lungs tight  
she reclaims her life.

The salt taste in her mouth,  
the deafening blood pound-  
how's that for surround sound?!  
As if she had found *desire*-

As if she was 16 again  
with Echion's breeding  
laid on her back  
brought to her knees

the kisses in this breeze are sweeter than that.  
Better than any physical gratification  
no complications,  
limbs free to blaze

under no man's gaze  
she's under the stars led by constellations.

The air smells damp  
the earth it moans  
it groans to her, it heats  
her bones.

Damp in the night as  
the moon lights the night greeted by Nix  
as she leaves her home.

Into the woods she goes-  
to make a life of her own.

**MESSENGER 1.**

'Your mother is with them'

*(pause)*

'I just thought you ought to know'.

**DIRT**

**I.**

She sleeps on the ground.

She finds trouble sleeping the first few times. She finds new aches in her joints where her limbs realign. No use for her voice, but she learns to let go and the ground takes her weight as her bones reshape.

It's tough on her skin, it pulls at her throat, she grows thin, but she knows she's made no mistake. Preparing, sharing her strife, on the mountainside with dirt in her toes, her blood on the stones, making way for the night.

She calls to Nix to be kind.  
Until she grows in the wind  
she's lean in the storm,  
the sun rises higher and she's alive  
with the dawn.

**IN THE WOODS WITH DIONYSUS.**

There are others.

At first, she is shy,  
but it's her Bacchic rite to be here  
so, she drinks from the cup  
*(he is the god of wine)*.

Then she realises, she can just relax.

Her shoulders drop. There's no watching,  
no sense of all eyes on you, no apologising.  
She holds herself differently. No shrinking,  
being seen, fed from the earth and quenched  
from a stream. No fear.

No holding keys in between your fingers in case of attack,  
no eyes on you- no being followed to your front door,  
no avoiding eye contact so as not to encourage unwanted attention,  
no crossing the road to avoid them-  
no patronising tones and really,  
really wishing, to just be left alone.

Honeyed gifts from a god  
and dew from the dawn on your skin.

Miracles from vines  
to pay your respect, and ease your mind.

IO DIONYSUS!

Until she's so relaxed, that she falls even deeper in.

**RAVE.**

In different houses, in every city  
in different rooms  
lay loyalty, love and death,  
passion, words & water,  
fire, earth and air. Every country lays in  
Birth, Dirt and Bone.

Evolving.  
Constantly moving  
in a rhythmic tide of its own.

She thinks how much she loved hearing music.

Varied moods  
emerging, rolling around  
rooms beneath a row of roofs lined up in the street.

All with people. People just like you, and me-  
it's in the background of kitchens.  
Behind passions with one another,  
an echoing frame  
leading lovers into meetings.

When music *swells*,  
stories from keys- these strings!  
The marks they leave. The heat  
stirred up from these notes,  
friction from a string  
songs from the air.  
Music made from silence  
enthraling the stratosphere-  
it's ability, it's integrity!  
It would bring her to her knees.

Shoulders squared  
heart full of rhythm.  
The only time she ever felt free.

Until now.

She follows the sound.  
Her head swims in the trees  
the floor falls beneath  
and they are floored  
by the gifts  
of sound.

Ecstasy is the transcendence of the ordinary state.

Suggesting, an intensification of emotion so powerful,  
as to produce a trancelike dissociation from  
all -but the single overpowering feeling.

It is an altered state of consciousness that moves a person beyond the self  
into a unified awareness.

Expanding our spiritual horizons, and enhancing our physical abilities.

Dionysus instigates this trance and ushers us into his realm of ecstatic awareness.

It's women only.

Their bodies moving  
their limbs now alight  
dancing themselves into a frenzy.

Their liberation from a status  
falling free  
of psychological barriers

they are  
in seclusion  
to be free.

When another body is so energised  
is stood beside you so wise  
and so loud  
that it brings in a crowd.  
You stand there with them,  
so proud, watching.  
Tearful eyed at these sounds from the air,  
words from a mouth you can't quite believe.  
Shapes  
figures  
colours  
and sounds  
all beside bodies beside you  
and you've never felt so alive.  
This energy  
radiating through a crowd.  
Searing sounds in no sense  
that hang in the aether, another element.  
An immense sound of love to date  
revealing a higher ground.

Breath held, in case you miss a word.

Her body shakes.

She doesn't try to control it, no restraint- there's too much at stake.  
She wants to *feel* every moment  
to give her whole self-up to this glorious god that shook her awake.

She's so nervous- no-one knows what he's going to say.  
They're so nervous because they can't *wait* to hear  
what he has to say.

Agave's sick to her stomach.

He's three steps away. At arm's length  
she can *feel* his energy.

He's electric.

She's there for the music. She's there for the feeling of freedom.

Blood pounds in her ears and she feels the years of heartache slip away.  
She needs to reach another level  
to maintain the pace

to reach the pinnacle and force the moment to its crisis

She's given her soul and delved in deep, in a sway of ecstasy bodies  
entwined she stands at the forefront  
*here-* with Dionysus!

Now.

Even in freedom, in a group of  
liberated women looking to feed  
it's human nature to form allegiance.

For someone to lead.

And finding her strength  
in bleeding feet  
Agave's face is to the sun and she hears her name on the breeze.

These frenzied feelings growing at such a fast pace  
you get lost in the race completely out of hand

you can barely stand as you get so out of your mind  
that time stands still. Days roll by

as your deepening thrill keeps you alive. And that's when gods whisper names in the  
wind

lions leave their pride  
and sons come to spy in  
disguise.

## **MESSENGER 2.**

'Your mother *is* with them'

(*pause*)

'I think they just want to be left alone.'

But Pentheus is a King! he has a plan of  
his own.

## **LION.**

He's intrigued.

He cannot resist seeing the forbidden.  
Watching his mother 'reclaiming her freedom'-  
This is gonna be good.

David Bullen

He knows what they're doing  
up there in the mountains-  
soft white thighs  
drenched in wine and no restraint  
and they tell me it's innocent?  
Give me a break.

You would never approach a tribe-  
let's say, unprepared.

He's been promised flesh! Pentheus has been dreaming  
visions of skin  
unapologetically at ease

but they're not so easy to find.  
Their true selves now hidden behind trees

hearts on their sleeves now  
exposed to the sky.

Whispers of violent tendencies.

So, he goes in disguise.

Dress, heels, black lines shaping his eyes- He's one of them!

*They won't accept you if you don't look alike* the god says.

His own societal strip back show; the big tease reveal of his lion's pride-  
Stripped! Of his masculinity  
-or so he's been advised.

Into the woods he goes!

Assuming he'll survive.

### **TO KILL MY SON THE LION.**

Her breath  
is hot  
and quick.

The adrenaline  
in a rush  
to cover  
all her limbs

don't let yourself think  
of this sickly pit  
her stomach sings

stay in the moment  
please  
stay with me

I get the feeling  
you're trying  
to leave.



She sees a shadow in the trees.

She feels  
a steadying breeze  
and the beat of a rhythm

that sets her free  
but there is  
movement

in between the bark

paws firmly on the ground.  
An intruder  
keeping his presence unknown

but she sees beyond  
and catches a glimpse  
of that lion's throat.

I knew I wasn't alone.  
This one has to go.

*Bring me the head.*

Thinking he's the king?  
Swanning in  
all proud and believing

his sleek lion's mane  
can keep him safe  
in these woods

where now only women remain?!  
I'll show you lion  
hear *me* roar!

Bigger and braver  
than I ever was before.  
Agave leads.

*Bring me the head.*

She calls to her tribe  
to bring that Lion  
down from the inside- take his crown!

Tear down the tree  
rip through vines  
rhythmic frenzy

With only one thing in their mind  
to pull limb from limb  
with their own freedom to win.

He hits the ground  
removing make-up in  
a hurry

in a plea to his mother's milk

David Bullen

and love me now  
she must recognise me

mother you must know me!

But she knows no boundaries.  
He's brought to his knees  
and she thinks

I must have that lion's head.

Mounted on a spike in  
this light of day

opportunity presents itself  
and I must win this fight.

The tendons are tight.

The bloods  
warm, joints  
once aligned

now  
torn  
apart

Neck cracked

Violent Art

The light leaves his eyes  
and he thinks my god,  
gods are cunts.

Just before he dies.

She breathes fast.

the stillness lasts  
heads pound  
with racing heart beats

and feet start descending back down.  
Others start to leave.

Brought back to the ground come down fast-  
the frenzy's passed.

Shivering starts.  
It's 7am and the sun's not ready  
to comfort their Art.

What seems  
like moments  
pass by

when you come down

from the skies  
that once held you

so high  
in a sway of ecstasy  
you truly believe

in this feeling,  
and as of yet  
no real reeling

as to what you have done.

## **BONE**

### **AFTER.**

She's left alone on the shore, a little unsure  
of how  
she came  
to be.

Hair entangled  
and her limbs  
so sore from  
the lessons of love.

Bruises emerging  
the winds pickin' up- skies quick thickening with  
the waters rage  
sickening

and the deafening sound  
of a thundering cloud  
is all that surrounds her now  
as the rain starts to fall.

Her blood pounds  
realisation dawns  
Reality sets in and the situations raw.  
Her chest sears with pain

no longer numb,  
sensations returned  
and her heart burns again.  
It hits the water

like a wall of  
rain over me  
and embrace  
my fall.

Bare laid lone bones  
all of this woman's own-  
her and her son  
stripped down to the core.

David Bullen

Her chest swells  
her shoulders ache  
her throat melts  
as she lay on the stones

ego thrown  
she thinks  
I must be in Hell.  
Agave breathes-  
she is alone.

A focus  
on the physical pain  
turns to a soft glaze,

and her body weight lays  
heavy on the ground now  
the gravitational pull

on her concentration  
down to a level  
where it all evens out.

Her vision stops spinning  
and all the fears and the doubts  
come to a standstill.

A rhythm is found.

Her heart roars.  
and this god that  
she adores

is nowhere to be found.

She's left alone  
with her freedom  
and blood on her hands.

She tries to stand.

No tribe to hear her moans  
near her now  
all senses  
seized by the throat

no care for the smell  
only a stench of flesh  
and nothing else left  
to soothe her own throat.

Fresh earth  
dug out  
turned over  
to bury his bones.

Wet dirt  
stained stones,  
on the edge  
of the water

what remains of a daughter

and where once was a home  
now full of grief

tears wept for the loss of hope  
and for the people they could  
have been.

Left  
in a mess  
of a rattling carcass  
and freshly torn flesh.

The birds come to prey.

She thinks  
I'll stay here a little longer  
till my legs can grow stronger  
Then I'll face the day.

She hears someone behind her.

Her father appears in all his glory.  
He's asleep at her throat, she breathes deep  
and she knows  
she can't speak.

Gut thrown  
cut throat, brought to her knees  
and only a stench in the air  
from forgotten Theban streets.

He says,  
your apology is boring.

What once was seen as so diligent now  
turns to abhorring  
your pride is pouring  
landfill into the weight child,  
What once burnt bright child  
has turned sour and grave child.

You're dead to me.

She says

*it wasn't all my fault. I wasn't always alone.*

She thinks of the women, Pentheus, Echion, the music, her father and his hatred for what she  
has done. Of Dionysus.

*I thought I was in control.  
I've lost all my own  
he held my gaze, and it placed  
a hunger in my soul. I heard a truth-*

Your senses were thrown.

*I bowed to the earth  
he called my name-  
I've been devoured by a god who promised me I could be free if I held my own.*

Gods play games.  
They prove a point until you listen.  
Until you bow to their dismissal of human integrity and they show you  
how little you mean in the grand scheme of the sky.

He says you're dead to me. Don't you ever come home.

She thinks  
I'll stay here a little longer  
till my legs can grow stronger  
then I'll face the day.

Stories run wild of how we came to be  
so hard skinned and who invokes our memories.

The names of those who leave their mark upon our skin,  
where now only an imprint remains.

So, when her senses are seized by the wine, and she's brought to her knees  
and can't keep it contained- Agave goes back inside, in from the rain.

To sleep, to eat, to feed- to grow strong, to lick her wounds in peace.  
She looks to the sky, while the waves in the sea thrash on.

FIN.

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